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A NOBLE WOMAN.



VOL. I.

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A NOBLE WOMAN.

BY

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“A BOOK ABOUT LAWYERS,” “A BOOK ABOUT DOCTORS,”

“LIVE IT DOWN,” &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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A NOBLE WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

The Border.

IN a bold and picturesque district of England stands the ancient town of Carlton Cross,—with its population of eight thousand three hundred and forty-two inhabitants (according to the returns of the last census); its stupendous Norman church, concerning the plan and funds for restoring which sacred edifice the parishioners are at this present moment in the full heat of a lively contention; its manufacture of woollen fabrics, which, notwithstanding their high price and the hardness of the times, still hold their ground against the cheaper and less durable products of Lancashire shoddy-mills; its buoyant trade in articles of agricultural produce and consumption; and its right to influence the action of the House of

Commons by the voices and votes of two burgesses.

Like other English towns Carlton Cross stands in a county, but instead of taking pride in their connexion with the particular province in which they are placed, its inhabitants, following in the steps of their forefathers, and countenanced by the general usage of the district for miles round, prefer to speak of themselves as denizens of the Border. From the energy with which they boast about the natural and social characteristics of their Border—meaning thereby a line of country in which three of our richest counties impinge upon each other, so that a horseman may spring into his saddle at Carlton Cross, after an early breakfast, and return to a mid-day dinner after a gallop through three provinces; and also from the tone of self-glorification with which they assert their claim to respect as Border-men—it would seem that to be born, bred, and placed in business on the extreme verge of an English county are conditions peculiarly favourable to the higher qualities of our nature.

In some respects the men of Carlton Cross are not without good reasons for their local arrogance, which, notwithstanding its narrowness, is less offensive than many forms of pride that

persons are less ready to denounce than to admire; and far from saying that the qualities which give a colour of justice to their self-complacency are in no measure due to topographical circumstances, the writer of this page is inclined to think that much of the fearlessness towards persons and genuine self-sufficiency—which distinguish the humbler denizens of the Border from most other rural populations—may be fairly attributed to the position which makes them men of three counties rather than one. The rural mind is prone to over-estimate the greatness and dignity of its local magnates, to imagine that the powers of a county magistrate are co-extensive with creation, to cherish an undue respect for the social system of which its own particular lord-lieutenant is the cornerstone, and to lose all sense of its own personal respectability in incessant admiration of those whom its imagination has unduly exalted. Now the ordinary folk of the Carlton Cross Border are preserved from this proneness to a debasing idolatry by the number as well as conflicting opinions of their provincial deities. Instead of pinning their faith to one mighty *Custos Rotulorum*, they are critical about heads of counties, and pay their court alternately to three great

lords. The farmer indignant at what he conceives to be the tyranny of a local justice has the consolation of knowing the exact limit of the despot's jurisdiction. On this side the river Wandle the leading gentry are yellow, on the other side they are blue—in a political sense. North of the Windrush the clergy encourage prayer-meetings, and gather pence for the Church Missionary Society; on the southern bank they ride in pink and see no harm in whist. Hence it happens that the inferior people of the Border are saved from the common error of supposing that gentlefolk are all of one mind, and that if a tenant ventures to differ from his squire on a matter of politics or sport he is guilty of a heinous offence against public order and morals.

But though the humbler inhabitants of the Border contrast favourably with many rustic populations by reason of their comparative freedom from dulness and servility, it must not be inferred that they have made any important advance from the rudeness of old-fashioned country manners, or have unanimously adopted the smartness and superficial refinement of town life. In brogue, accent, dress, and festive arrangements the more prosperous commonalty of the three shires are provincial, and proud of their

provincialism. They dine at mid-day, and drink rum-toddy at eventide. Their men are so far under the influence of exploded usages that, throughout the summer months, they go to church in breeches and top-boots. Amongst their women a feeling prevails that it is not altogether seemly for people, who don't wish to count for more than their betters, to adopt a new fashion of millinery until it has been "out" for at least ten years. Their children are more remarkable for flesh than sprightliness. At their Christmas parties it is interesting to mark the unflagging zeal with which the boys and girls, dancing wildly but not too well, keep up their waltzes and Sir Rogers, their curiously different "sets" of quadrilles, and numerous variations of the country dance, from six P.M. to six A.M. At these same entertainments also the stranger has occasion to marvel at the startling combinations of colour which mark the costumes of the women, and at the quantity of pared apples, sliced oranges, strong negus and red filberts which the young ladies consume between high tea and higher supper. If any student of social manners would like to see our great-grandfathers' rules for the drinking of healths still carried out in every particular, he should obtain admittance,

during a season of gaiety, to some of the more primitive and less refined homes of the Carlton Cross Border. .

When an inhabitant of this part is taken to task for any notable departure from the ways of ordinary men, he usually palliates his eccentricity by observing, "I'm a strange fellow ; but you must remember that I live in the Border, where there's room enough for all sorts, and a spare corner for strangers who know how to make themselves good neighbours ;" by which common saying truthful testimony is borne to the outward appearance no less than to the social life of a line of country which is remarkable, beyond most other well-wooded and highly cultivated districts, for the openness of its scenery. Here and there it has a shady lane, such as those which Gainsborough loved to paint ; but it nowhere stifles the traveller with an oppressive weight of overhanging foliage and close barriers of impenetrable hedges. It is a region in which a man can breathe freely, and find a merry breeze even in the dog-days. Roominess qualifies the entire land. The farms are large ; the enclosures fenced with stone walls—which Nature, cleverest of gardeners, has adorned with bright mosses, and feathery grasses and unobtrusive

flowers—are as extensive as many a farm in the heavy lands of Suffolk. The halls of the county grandees lie amidst deer-parks of rare spaciousness; the farm-houses are conspicuous for size and for the magnitude of their out-buildings; the hamlets and villages and smaller market-towns—that look respectfully towards Carlton Cross as a metropolis—instead of being mere huddles of lath-and-plaster cabins, no less offensive to the nose than petty to the eye, are made up of ample stone buildings ranged on either side of broad roads that are bordered by strips of green waste, on which the sun-burnt children of the peasantry sleep and play by turns throughout the summer days.

From whatever point he enters, by whatever route he may traverse it, the tourist of the Border comes on nothing that is outwardly small or mean. Everywhere he finds himself amidst magnificent spaces and noble growths. Huge churches, prodigiously beyond the requirements of any congregations they have ever had or are likely to have, and set upon elevated ground, so that they are landmarks visible at great distances; bold hills that rise from the level with majestic curves, from which a pack of hounds may be watched throughout a six miles' run by the eye that is so

lucky as to catch them running in the right direction ; ancient roadside taverns, each of them big enough to shelter a company of troopers ; superb ranges of woodland, along which the vision travels to the purple heath, where their greenness is lost ; the stately fluctuations of the Windrush and the Wandle, upon the surface of which fair rivers there is a constant passing of silent barges between Carlton Cross and the great cities of manufacture, to which the surplus labour of the Border towns steadily flows. These are some of the objects that strike the tourist who, if he be an observant man, is well pleased to notice the signs of material prosperity in the faces of the working people, and to remark that attenuated legs and ridiculously small ankles and nipped features are less common amongst the ploughmen and hedgers of the Border than they are amongst the ploughmen and hedgers of East Anglia or Somersetshire. Nor does he fail to detect a certain harmony between the liberal outlines of the scenery and the no less liberal proportions of the horses, cattle, and other livestock of the Border farmers, who have for many a year been renowned for their skill and successful enterprise as breeders. Even the geese of the Border commons are big beyond the wont

of geese in less exuberant localities, and seem to quack boastfully of their fat and weight as they turn their foolish heads over their broad backs and waddle across the sunny turf.

Enough has been said to show that the Border is a more than ordinarily prosperous region ; and the conscientious writer of this page does not think that he has painted its fortune in too glowing colours. From the earliest memory of its oldest inhabitant down to the present time it has enjoyed an even flow of happy circumstances. Even under the old Poor Law, when vice and hopeless destitution were almost universal amongst our rural poor, the workmen of the Border villages were an orderly and thrifty class—enjoying a buoyant market for their surplus labour in the blanket factories of Carlton Cross, in the mills and workshops of the not remote manufacturing towns—to which allusion has already been made—and displaying no unwillingness to make the utmost of their advantages. At the present time, indeed, it is averred throughout the district that “ times are not what they used to be ;” that the blanket-makers are hard pressed by Lancashire competitors ; that the farmers make less out of the land than they did in past time ; and that

shillings are scarcer than guineas used to be when George the Third and Mr. Pitt were good enough to manage the affairs of the nation. But in spite of all this grumbling there is an abundance of testimony that the Border has not, as yet, made many steps towards ruin. It is very rare that a Border tradesman "breaks" under circumstances which render it impossible for charitable observers to trace his ruin to his folly. Notwithstanding the badness of the times, the Border farmers ride good horses, and after market ordinaries play "rap-in" with vociferous energy. It may be that rich men are fewer in Carlton Cross than they were fifty years since; but no rightly introduced stranger tarries in the borough for a fortnight without forming a high estimate of the affluence and hospitality of its principal families.

A bright, smart, pictorial old town—none the less striking and pleasant because it has greater breadth and roominess than most English towns of its date; a prodigious church, big enough for a cathedral, planted on its outskirts; hard by the church a rectory-house, big enough for a college, flanked with thick shrubberies, and overlooking the meadows through which the Wandle meanders towards the borough; betwixt these

ecclesiastical buildings and the "old town" a park-like space, planted with limes, and bisected by the London road; abutting on this park-like space the gardens of wealthy residents, who have built villas for themselves upon "the Green"—as the open lawn between the church and market cross is termed; a wide, granite-paved thoroughfare running straight through the "old town," and sending off by-streets to factories and inferior quarters; an old market-cross, in which the farmers and blanket-makers of the Border did business ere ever William Shakspeare had written a line of his plays; antique hostelries with sharply-peaked gables and grotesque sign-boards; shops of the unassuming kind, with narrow windows and doors so fashioned that they can be closed at bottom and left open at top; shops of the ambitious sort, running into plate-glass, in defiance of an architecture that discountenances the vain display; pompous private houses, Georgian in style and redness of brick, and resplendent with brilliantly burnished windows. This is Carlton Cross as it appears at this day; very much also as it looked years ago to men and women whose bones are resting in the old parish church.

And to those who through strong sympathy

with the joys and sorrows of human nature find habitual delight in hopeful anticipations of the future, no less than in tender recollections of the past, it is pleasant to think that the old town will not look far otherwise to generations yet unborn, when we shall be no more, and all our foolish doings shall have clean vanished from the ways and minds of men.

CHAPTER II.

Friends from Childhood upwards.

ON an autumn evening, midway between the passing of the great Reform Bill of '32 and the general election of December in the same year, two friends were chatting together in a lofty room of the reddest and most pompous of the Georgian houses alluded to at the close of the last chapter. The house—standing directly opposite the market cross at the southern extremity of the thoroughfare, and hard by “the Green”—was, and still is, the residence of James Stapleton, Licentiate of the Apothecaries’ Company, and Member of the College of Surgeons of London; and the furniture and fittings of the lofty room would have left no doubt on the mind of any intruder that it was a surgeon’s consulting-room. With reason James Stapleton was proud of the apartment, flattering himself that no surgeon in the whole Border received his patients in a more spacious or more imposing room. Ranged on shelves and pro-

tected by glass were visible the many volumes of a medical library, which had steadily accumulated throughout the two centuries that had witnessed a Stapleton ministering to the sick of Carlton Cross; ostentatiously stacked in rows, one above another, in a big recess, were the worm-eaten and dusty day-books in which six generations of Stapletons had written their more or less unscientific prescriptions for the mitigation of human suffering; and as though this pile of ancient records was not of itself sufficient to certify the long endurance of "the practice," Mr. James Stapleton had placed in conspicuous positions all the antiquated instruments, professional trophies, and scientific curiosities which his forefathers had used, won, or gathered together during their long battle with an invincible enemy. Nor were there wanting proofs that "the practice" had kept pace with science in more recent times, for in contrast to this singular museum of the clumsy appliances and grotesque paraphernalia with which medical incapacity used to array itself in past times, were displayed the microscope, galvanic battery, chemical apparatus, and microscopic specimens which honest James Stapleton had added to the contents of his hall of audience.

The friends had seated themselves at an open window that looked into James Stapleton's garden, from which scene of continuous horticultural triumphs a light current of air, laden with the fragrance of flowers, and cooled by the falling dew, came through a trellis of vine-branches and fig-leaves, and mingled its perfume with the aroma of the cigar which one of the two companions was smoking ; and as they thus sate, enjoying the comparative coolness of the evening after a day of oppressive heat, the moonlight without and the bright lamplight within combined to render their forms and features distinctly visible to those mysterious agents of Romance who, in the service of novel-writers, are empowered to look through key-holes, listen at doors, witness secret interviews, and watch the actions of heroes and heroines in their most private hours and in their most secluded retreats.

A brief scrutiny would have enabled any spectator to catch some of the external points of dissimilarity which distinguished James Stapleton, the surgeon, from his intimate friend Hercules Kingsford, junior, solicitor of Carlton Cross, and heir-presumptive to his uncle, Hercules Kingsford, senior, banker of the same town. The late Mr. James, whose historical romances were not

deficient in number, would have described the pair as being still young, but bearing in their countenances abundant evidence that they were no longer boys. Though neither of them had received the first gray hairs of advancing age, no one under eighty years would have thought of calling them "boys." James Stapleton was in his thirty-third year, and Hercules Kingsford, junior, still wanted a few months of thirty-four years; but with the exception of this nearness of age, and a corresponding similarity of rank and general culture, they were unlike in every one of those particulars to which a scientific student of human nature directs attention before he decides upon the correct classification of any individual of our race.

James Stapleton was tall, six feet without his shoes, broadly built, awkward in gait and figure, and altogether without any title to the admiration which young ladies of the sentimental mood are popularly supposed to reserve for facial beauty and features of classic mould. A more direct counterpart to the grace and dignified ease of the Apollo Belvidere than this large-limbed surgeon, it would be difficult to imagine. At first sight his appearance was uncouth almost to boorishness, and grotesquely clumsy. His head

was covered with short, sticky hair : his eyebrows were straight lines, projecting a shed-like roof over deep-set eyes ; his feeble whiskers neither afforded concealment to his ill-shaped ears, nor adequately veiled the harshness and angularity of his countenance at the points where his big jaws played upon each other, sending upwards and outwards two bold hillocks of muscle whenever he set his upper and lower teeth firmly together, as he was wont to do at moments of earnest thought ; his nose, at no point remarkable for delicacy, broadened and turned upwards as it came to an end ; and his loose sprawling lips were just the kind of lips which, in these days of toleration on all questions pertaining to hair, are usually concealed beneath moustaches. To his disadvantage, also, let it be added, that his shoulders were round as well as broad, and that to meet the exigencies of his feet he wore boots that were as capacious as fiddle-boxes.

In compensation, however, for these undesirable characteristics, he possessed certain physical endowments that greatly contributed to the popularity which he enjoyed in his native town. He stood well upon his clumsy feet ; the roundness of his shoulders was counterbalanced by the prominence and manifest strength of a broad

chest; his big boar's head was thrown backwards, so that it rose from his neck with an air of manly confidence which accorded with his stature and bodily massiveness. The smile that illuminated his face, brightening it with the light of irresistible cordiality, would have atoned for the unsightliness of far uglier features; and in the recesses of his shed-like brows there dwelt a pair of magnificent brown eyes, into which neither woman nor man could look without conceiving a favourable opinion of their possessor. Moreover, when the brown eyes brightened in harmony with a smile, the lines of the shed-like brows were relieved of their straightness and became two well-matched curves. But the natural gift which gave him a still stronger influence over his companions, was the deep metallic voice that rung out with the clearness and musical purity of a cathedral bell. It was a most singular voice—sonorous but never riotous, loud even in its undertones, but never harsh, and at all times impressing hearers with a feeling that its owner could, an it pleased him, pour forth a deafening thunder of eloquence. Thus it was that, notwithstanding the ungainliness of his shape, James Stapleton was about the last man in the whole Border at whom his neighbours would have thought

of raising a laugh. His stalwart form testified to his strength; his smile proclaimed him kindly, and abounding in sympathy; his brown eyes said that he was unassailably honest; his voice was the music of a brave and gentle nature. And in men who are kindly, honest, gentle, and strong, worse faults than external ugliness are readily pardoned.

A noticeable contrast to this simple, child-like giant was the other young man, whose habitual daintiness in matters of costume was as remarkable as the surgeon's disregard of his personal appearance, and who now sat erect in an easy chair, clothed in the stiff decorous dress of five-and-thirty years since, whilst the master of the house was lounging on a sofa in his shirt-sleeves.

For three generations the Kingsfords had been an uplooking family, slowly and surely working their way up the steps of social promotion; and now that they had made themselves the first family of "the town," a noble ambition had seized them to take rank amongst the landed gentry of the Border. For this purpose Ambrose Kingsford and his brother, Hercules Kingsford, senior, had entered into a compact, when Hercules Kingsford, junior, was still a schoolboy.

For this purpose Ambrose Kingsford, attorney-at-law, whose death occurred rather more than two years before the commencement of this tale, had planted his younger sons at a considerable distance from Carlton Cross, so that when the Kingsfords should gain a definite position amongst the county gentry of their neighbourhood, they might not be surrounded with a prejudicial swarm of struggling cousins. For this purpose the said Ambrose Kingsford, deceased, besides leaving his eldest son Hercules the whole interest of his long-established and lucrative practice, had also bequeathed to him a double portion of his remaining estate. For this purpose, Hercules Kingsford, senior, a childless widower, had admitted his nephew to a partnership in "Kingsford's Bank," and had arranged to make him his heir, both with respect to the bank and his other property. For this purpose, also, Hercules Kingsford, senior, had purchased Coote Hall, a picturesque manor-house in the neighbourhood of Carlton Cross, and on making it his residence had secured admission to the bench of county justices, whereby the romantic, worldly, ambitious, vain old banker flattered himself that his nephew and heir, on becoming the proprietor of Coote Hall, would all the more readily obtain the status of

a Border gentleman with long-established county interests.

Thus for years there had been a conspiracy in action to make Hercules Kingsford, junior, a great man. For the attainment of this scarcely sufficient end, his three brothers had been pushed into the world with very slender resources, and his only sister planted upon a struggling London solicitor with one thousand five hundred pounds for her portion. It is probable that the sister and three younger brothers would have preferred another distribution of the family opulence ; but as they were powerless to alter their father's will or divert their uncle from his cherished scheme, they kept their heart-burnings to their own breasts, and comforted themselves with thinking that the family honour would be gallantly sustained in their old neighbourhood, and that when their brother Hercules should be established at Coote Hall they would be amongst his constant visitors. Whilst his brothers and sister accepted their fortune thus submissively, it is scarcely a matter for surprise that, as a dutiful son and grateful nephew, Hercules had piously resolved to do his utmost to carry out the wishes of his father and uncle.

It was characteristic of the said brothers Ambrose and Hercules, and significant of their

commercial position, that whilst they plotted to make themselves a county family in the person of their heir, they never proposed to make him an idle gentleman, independent of profession and business. Perhaps the ambitious veterans knew that their combined wealth would have been insufficient for such a scheme ; perhaps they saw that their project would collapse if the second Kingsford of Coote Hall did not possess some "potentiality of amassing wealth" besides the rents of half-a-dozen farms. Anyhow, their wish was that young Hercules, whilst taking status in his county, should also remain the unquestionable chief of the borough. Banking was a business in which gentlemen of the highest families could concern themselves without losing caste ; the law was a profession which a country squire might follow during his heyday of bodily vigour and yet hold up his head amongst country gentlemen towards the close of his days ; a sound though small banking business, and a flourishing legal practice would together yield an income superior to the rental of an average county estate. Under these circumstances young Hercules should be brought up to the two businesses. In Carlton Cross he should be banker and solicitor, and occasionally, in compliment to the

townsfolk, mayor of the borough ; at Coote Hall he should be a country gentleman, and on retiring from the roll of practising solicitors, years hence, a county magistrate, possibly a deputy-lieutenant. It was even conceivable that if he worked his two connexions prudently, he might in course of time sit in parliament for his native town, and win the honour of the Blood-red Hand. This was the scheme of the two vain old men—a scheme not laid before Hercules the younger with all its details of foolish imagination, as it had taken form in the sympathetic minds of its projectors, but suggested to him from his earliest childhood by constant exhortations that he should make the most of the advantages lavished upon him, and of the position to which he would be ultimately raised by the munificence of his father and uncle.

Whether he was qualified by nature to run the career thus marked out for him, will be seen in the course of this story, which will show—how far certain jealous observers of the young man's character and rising fortunes were justified in maintaining that he lacked the sound judgment and stable qualities by which his father and uncle had been enabled to climb above their neighbours ; and how far events fulfilled the predic-


tions of those same jealous observers, who had contracted a habit of whispering that, notwithstanding his authoritative manner and fluent tongue, and showy endowments, Hercules Kingsford, junior, would disappoint the ambitious expectations of his family.

For the present every reader is left to form his own estimate of the well-looking man who is now brought upon the scene smoking a cheroot, whilst with an air of prim self-esteem visible in his clean-cut features, and a tone of insolent good-humour perceptible in his sharp but not unmusical voice, he gossips with his old school-mate and peculiar friend. Though most observers are inclined to think that his slight face, with its aquiline nose, thin lips, and restless grey eyes, contains no indications of extraordinary mental power, they detect on the other hand signs of nervous energy and constitutional self-confidence in the mobility of his eager countenance and the smart decisiveness of his diction, as well as in the tone of affable condescension with which he ventures from time to time to signify his approbation of his companion's sentiments and conduct. Nor does the eye, clever at reading character, fail to construe as manifestations of personal vanity the evident pleasure which Mr.

Hercules Kingsford finds in regarding the whiteness of the dainty hand that is continually taking his cigar from his lips, and the no less apparent satisfaction with which he repeatedly glances at an adjacent mirror, wherein he sees the reflection of his brown curling hair and comely face, his high-collared walking-frock and spotless white waistcoat, his befrilled shirt-front, and all the other external adornments of his not ungraceful figure, which appears to be somewhat below the average height of Englishmen now that it is placed in immediate proximity to the surgeon's far larger and more powerful frame.

CHAPTER III.

A Blush on a Simple Man's Face.

NSTEAD of discussing politics and public men, after the fashion of young men in political novels, James Stapleton and Herrick spoke about their private affairs, the social interests of their town, the qualifications of a neighbour for the distinguished position of chairman at the next hunt dinner, the fitness of a less eminent townsman for the vacant office of parish-crier, the prices of hay and horseflesh, and other matters of even less importance to the world beyond the boundaries of the borough. Alternately speaking of themselves and their common acquaintances, by turns recalling the past and making conjectures as to the future, they restated their favourite opinions, and exchanged for the thousandth time their private views on divers trivial matters. In fact they gossiped—without a single flash of epigrammatic wit or a single Latin quotation,—after the wont of intimate friends, in all places save the pages of romantic

fiction, sitting over pipe or bottle, and talking about what most nearly concerns them for their own pure pleasure.

“ So you have been up to the rectory, Jem ? ” inquired Jem’s friend, taking his cigar from his lips, and looking at the white hand in which he held the cigar rather than at the face of the person whom he addressed.

“ Yes. How did you hear that ? ay, Herrick ? ”

Hercules being too superb a name for ordinary use, the Kingsfords permitted their intimate friends to shorten and modify it into Herrick. Notwithstanding their pride in the heroic appellation which had been borne by numerous members of their family, settled in times past and present about the Border, they encouraged their companions to use the less sonorous and terrifying title. “ Hercules ” was for the public, the tongues of clients and business connexions, the columns of county papers, the platforms of political meetings : “ Herrick ” the name for the freedom and good-fellowship of domestic life. And even amongst the outside public the young lawyer was very generally known by the familiar diminutive. Hercules was the special designation of the uncle. It was Hercules Kingsford, Esq.,

of Coote Hall, who was periodically announced in the public press as taking the chair at magistrates' meetings. As Hercules Kingsford, the grey-headed senior was entered in the "Bankers' Directory," his nephew and partner being as yet unnoticed in the official title of the banking establishment. As his uncle's heir, the nephew would eventually inherit, together with his uncle's estate, the fulness of the family name; but until the old man should have closed his account with the world, and gone to his last rest, "the quality" of Carlton Cross had made up its mind to know Hercules Kingsford, junior, by the style and title of Mr. Herrick Kingsford.

"I did not hear it? I saw your gig at the gate," responded Herrick.

"Did you? You see everything that goes on in the town. I do believe, Herrick, that somehow or other your office windows overlook every street in the borough. Yes, I was at the rectory; and what's more, I had the good luck to be sent for to call on the rector and Lady Bertha in my professional capacity. You see, the family arrived only yesterday."

"The day before yesterday," interposed Herrick. "Canon Godsall was rung in this day week, and Lady Bertha arrived the night before

last. It was yesterday we heard that her ladyship and the children had driven up to the rectory shortly before midnight.”

“No doubt; I did not count the minutes before midnight. But, anyhow, yesterday was their first day in the town, and it was yesterday morning that I said to my dear mother, ‘I suppose, madam, you’ll call at the rectory and pay your respects to Lady Bertha Godsall.’ It seemed to me, you know, Herrick, that my dear mother would naturally have wished to lose no time in paying the lady of our new rector that attention. But my dear mother, whose taste and knowledge of the world are admirable—bless me, the number of scrapes they have saved me from!—soon showed me that I had only looked at the matter from my point of view. ‘James,’ my mother said to me, ‘I must take my own time about calling on Lady Bertha Godsall. Of course I owe her respect as the wife of my rector, as a lady who has recently arrived in the parish, moreover, as an English gentlewoman who belongs to a social grade far above that of my late husband, and also superior to that to which I belong as my father’s daughter. But for your sake, James—for your dignity, about which you are apt to think far too little—I

must not appear too eager to call on her ladyship. It is not right for me to forget that I was a Howlett of Wrentham.’”

“To be sure. My uncle often danced with your mother when she was Miss Howlett. Her father, and ever so many Howletts before him, had been rectors of Wrentham for I don’t know how many generations. You have reason to be proud of your mother’s family,” said Herrick, partly out of sincere regard for the race of Howlett, but much more from a habit of saying civil things, and dispensing flattery amongst all persons who were ready to repay his pleasant speeches with genuine respect.

This had been the way with Herrick’s father and uncle, and, indeed, with the whole Kingsford family from the time when they first became leading personages in Carlton Cross. They had always been men of smooth tongues and complaisant manners, greedy of approbation, and ready to purchase it with extravagant professions of friendliness for their adherents, however humble they might be. Inflated with a sense of their own importance and superiority to persons in no respect their inferiors, they were magniloquently civil to all whom they encountered—considerate to servants, courteous to artisans,

sociable to shopkeepers, intensely affable to equals. They had a knack of asserting themselves by extolling others. Their outspoken authoritative adulation implied that they had right to sit in judgment on their neighbours, and decide who of them were especially distinguished by cleverness, or probity, or courage, or good looks ; and not one person out of every hundred on whom their flattery was showered resented it as impertinence or detected its worthlessness. In other and greater places than Carlton Cross men like to hear their own praises. Even in London flattery can find a market, and sometimes a very good one.

“ As to being proud about my mother’s family,” returned James Stapleton, with delicious simplicity, speaking in the most matter-of-fact tone of his mellow bass voice, “ of course I am very proud of it and everything that belongs to her ; but what with my business, and what with my amusements, I can’t find time for being proud about anything. I do assure you that when she told me yesterday that she was a Miss Howlett of Wrentham, it seemed to me that I must somehow or other have forgotten my maternal grandfather’s name. Of course I saw the full force of my mother’s words as soon as they

had passed her lips, and was ashamed of myself for not thinking from the first of what was due to her. You see, I was very anxious about getting the rectory on my professional list, for there was reason to fear that they might send for Donkin, as an older man and a husband and a father of a family, and all that sort of thing. And if they had done so, I should have had no right to complain, for though Donkin keeps a good many of my father's patients, who left the old practice before I could take the reins in hand, he has always been a good neighbour, and willing to stand by me at a pinch; and in fairness to him I must say that Donkin is an honourable opponent, with a shrewd eye and clear head for diagnosis. There are worse practitioners than Donkin, I can tell you."

"No doubt, it was a matter of importance for you to have the new people."

"And it was the importance of the matter that made me wish my mother should lose no time in calling. But she was quite right in declining to do it in a hurry. On such matters her judgment never fails her, and certainly no harm came of her decision, for before the evening a message came from the rectory summoning me to visit Lady Bertha herself. She

is only a little out of sorts, and it wont give me much trouble to set her right."

"Tell us about the people; I haven't seen any of them yet. Mr. Godsall and I have exchanged cards without seeing each other. My uncle has seen him, and calls him a nervous fellow—only half a man, that's my uncle's expression."

"I cannot say," replied James Stapleton, slightly raising his voice as he spoke deferentially of his new patient, "that Canon Godsall impressed me unfavourably. He is a tall, thin, comely gentleman, with aquiline profile, blue eyes, and long hair—flaxen hair that is fast turning gray, although he is only forty-five years of age. Not of a robust frame, he shows the signs of a delicate constitution in his countenance as well as in his figure; and after seeing him I was not surprised to learn that he preferred the amusements of a garden to horse exercise. But there can be no doubt that the Canon is a man of more than ordinary intellect. He has a good place amongst Oxford scholars, and besides being a musician and a musical composer he is an artist, sir,—an artist. I don't mean a connoisseur who spends money on pictures, but an artist who paints pictures of a very

high order. He was so good as to show me some of his works—pictures of saints and churches—and they are wonderfully good, Herrick, as good as anything in the artistic way that I ever come across in the houses of my very best patients.”

“Highly creditable in him to cultivate the fine arts; very creditable,” observed Herrick, with a grand air placing the stamp of his approval on the new rector. “I think those clergymen highly deserving of commendation who have intellectual interests beyond the narrow range of their professional studies. But though proficiency in painting and knowledge of music are desirable accomplishments in a divine whose position requires him to take the lead in society, they will not greatly assist him in controlling a town like this, in which the dissenting interest is unusually strong. When my uncle hinted that Mr. Godsall was only half a man, I understood him to mean that he would be only half a man in parish affairs. Now, would you think him naturally qualified to hold his own at a parish meeting in the face of a turbulent and powerful opposition?”

“There is no doubt that Canon Godsall is a shy man, and a nervous man, and by no means a robust man, and there is room to fear that such

a person would very likely fail to do justice to himself and his party at a parish meeting. We don't know enough of him yet to be justified in predicting positively how he will turn out; but I am inclined to think that he is more calculated for the domestic circle than for public life. I don't think he'll be a very active county magistrate, and I don't think he'll trouble himself much about the politics of the borough, beyond doing his duty by Church and State."

"So much the better, so much the better. As long as my uncle lives," said Herrick, well pleased with the thought that a rector of retiring temper and timid nature would be favourable rather than prejudicial to his own and his uncle's influence, "the borough has a sufficiently able chief, and when my dear uncle shall have left us—why, when that takes place, Jem, it will be comfortable for me to deal with a rector who will be content to strengthen my hands and act upon my counsel on all local matters. So he is of a domestic turn, is he? and devoted to his children, eh?"

"Prodigiously fond of his children," assented James Stapleton.

"And he has a handsome number of them?"

"Nine; and all boys. The eldest is at Christ

Church; three of them are at Winchester; the next three are to be taught by Mr. Henchman, the new curate; and then there is a governess for the two youngest, Herbert and Dugdale. It is a rare houseful of them. Lady Bertha complains of their noise, and wishes that some of them were girls. She is by no means strong, and a lady with weak nerves and nine sons to make a riot in her house is likely to know something about headache."

"A delicate father, a delicate mother, a swarm of children, and a good income," observed Herrick, summing up the facts of the case; "you'll make a good bill out of that house every year, Jem. You are a lucky fellow to have caught that house."

"Very lucky," assented James Stapleton, heartily; "and I feel all the better pleased, because I was so afraid that Lady Bertha would have sent for Donkin."

"Pooh! there was no fear of that. You are the first doctor in Carlton Cross, and the rector is morally bound to employ the first doctor."

Jem's simple heart was pleased with his friend's praise, and his delight was visible in the heightened colour of his broad face and in the brightness of his brown eyes, as he answered—

“ You are very kind, Herrick, to say so, and think so ; but if I am the first doctor of the place, Donkin is a very good second, and the Godsalls might very reasonably have preferred him to a younger man, who is not married. Moreover, Donkin has some good patients, who might have caught Canon Godsall’s ear before he had learnt precisely who was who, and might have prejudiced him in favour of my rival ; that’s what I was afraid of.”

“ And did it not strike you, Jem,” inquired Herrick, significantly, “ that your friends could do the same for you ?”

“ What do you mean ?” inquired the surgeon, with a note of sudden enlightenment in his voice, rising from his chair as he spoke, and taking a step towards Herrick’s chair.

“ Just this, Jem. My uncle and I knew that the Morrisons and the Tuckers, and all that sneaking lot, would be trying to push Donkin upon the new rector ; and so my uncle—who is a good fellow, mind you—was determined to take the game out of their hands. As a county magistrate, and chief of the borough, and all that sort of thing, he wrote to Mr. Godsall, offering him hospitality if he wished to visit Carlton Cross before taking possession of the

rectory; and ten days later, happening to be at Altringham—it's of Altringham cathedral that Mr. Godsall is a canon—he called on the rector, and lunched with him. Of course their talk was all about Carlton Cross, and you were mentioned; and before uncle Hercules took his leave the canon had promised to send for you."

"By Jove!" ejaculated James Stapleton, with a deeper roll in his sonorous voice, "it was very kind of Mr. Kingsford to take so much trouble for me; and it was just like you, Herrick, to talk to him, and show him how he might do me a service."

"My dear Jem, you make too much of a trifle," answered Herrick, well pleased at the effect of his communication. "My uncle and I are always glad to help you. In a certain way, you know, we are cousins, for your grandfather took my great-grandmother for a second wife; and my uncle always talks of you as if you were one of the Kingsford family. He and your father were fast friends; and you and I are fast friends."

"And we'll remain so, old boy," interposed James Stapleton, warmly.

"The thing that shall come between us, and make us enemies, will be something out of the

common way ; for Jem, you're a fine fellow, a right good fellow, and we are all proud of you," observed Herrick Kingsford, still sitting stiffly in his arm-chair ; and as he made this confession of pride he waved his right hand with an air which implied that since Herrick Kingsford and his uncle were proud of James Stapleton, society in all its grades and ramifications could not do otherwise than participate in their pride.

Had there been a single grain of captiousness in James Stapleton's temper ; had there been the slightest alloy of subserviency in his simple nature, he would have resented, or at least he would have felt the tone of patronage with which he had been commended ; but the sterling honesty of a disposition alike pure of sycophancy and artifice, combined with his singular modesty and pure amiability to render him insensible to insolence that would have provoked the anger of a sneak. It was the habit of his loyal heart to respect all persons, and exaggerate their good qualities, whilst he altogether neglected to give a thought to his own ; and in the indulgence of this habit he took a highly romantic and false view of his familiar friend Herrick, attributing to him sagacity, strength of purpose, kindliness, generosity, and

other characteristics for which, to use the language of extreme moderation, he was not more remarkable than most prosperous and self-confident young men. Hence it is no matter for surprise that instead of firing with indignation at his friend's air of superiority and condescension, he brightened with triumph on hearing the praise, and blushing from the roots of his big ears to the top of his broad forehead, covered his agitation with a nervous laugh as he observed—

“ You think too well of me, Herrick ; you do indeed, my dear Herrick. But it is very agreeable to know you like me.”

CHAPTER IV.

Country Doctor.

TO recover his equanimity after this outburst of emotion, the surgeon walked twice round the consulting-room, past the book-shelves and cases of antiquated instruments, the stack of worm-eaten diaries, and the cabinet of scientific curiosities; and having worked off his agitation by this bodily exercise, he took from the floor, to which it had fallen, a loose black surtout, and drew it over his ample figure, in lieu of the walking-coat which he had put aside at an earlier period of the evening, and placed beyond the reach of the fumes of Herrick's cigar.

Although no violent intolerance prevailed in Carlton Cross on questions pertaining to tobacco, the more refined families of the borough, no less than the Border gentry, were of opinion that smoking was an enjoyment in which clergymen and doctors had no right to indulge; since, on the one hand, members of the medical profession

were bound alike by interest and right feeling to do nothing that should render them personally unacceptable in the drawing-rooms of fastidious ladies ; and on the other, the clerical order could not, without prejudice to their sacred character and influence, participate in pleasures which imparted to their garments a savour likely to offend the nostrils of weak brethren. Nor were the Border gentry any the more disposed to laxity of tone concerning this moral canon, as far as it affected the clergy, because it was glaringly inconsistent with the liberality of a neighbourhood which in some matters gave unusual licence to its appointed teachers of religion, permitting them to play short whist or unlimited loo, encouraging them to drink port wine to any degree of exhilaration short of flagrant indecorum, and regarding with kindly toleration, if not open sympathy, the devotion which many of their wealthy and well-descended clergy manifested to the sports of the field. So far as this social ordinance against tobacco affected himself and other followers of medicine, James Stapleton scrupulously and conscientiously observed and approved it, even as his docile and modest nature observed and approved all those rules which society had wisely provided for his guidance and

its own well-being. Herrick was the only person whom he allowed to smoke within his walls ; and though, out of respect to their singularly confidential intimacy he made this large concession to his friend's weakness, the cautious and very respectable surgeon took careful measures that his good nature should be productive of the smallest possible amount of inconvenience and evil consequence.

When James Stapleton resumed his seat at the open window, under the leaves of his vine and fig-tree, Herrick Kingsford—whose thoughts had run from his part in procuring the surgeon a new patient to the general prosperity of the doctor's practice—renewed the conversation by saying—

“ Anyhow, Jem, you've been flourishing during these last ten years. There are not many doctors in this part of the world who are doing better than you. Your bank-account, you scoundrel—ah ! I know about that—is a fat one in comparison with many accounts which I know about also, and which are placed at Kingsford's by men who think themselves something better than most of their neighbours.”

“ I am doing well,” assented James Stapleton—“ but I work hard—sometimes very hard.

Last year I netted over a thousand pounds, and so far as this year has run out I am justified in saying that I have made a great spring since the opening of last January. This year's income promises to be better than last by three hundred pounds, at least."

"Go on, go on—and you'll be a rich man ; but not richer than you deserve."

"I don't want to be rich ; that's not my ambition, Herrick. I don't want to get the upper-hand of my neighbours ;—no, that's not my ambition. I talk to you about my good fortune because I talk to you about everything, as a man should speak with an old friend ; but if I thought that you were inclined to set me down from what I said just now as bragging about my good fortune, you'd never hear me allude to it again,—there. Rather than swell out and become purse-proud, I'd shrivel and be glad to mix drugs for Donkin. There's only one kind of pride that makes me sick at seeing it, and that's purse pride. So don't think I'm setting my heart on riches."

"I don't wrong you, my boy. But there must be people of all kinds of taste in this world ; and for my own part I must own that, if I could see my way to making a hundred thousand pounds in the next twenty years, I would take

the road very promptly. But then I am a banker, and a banker's nephew, and therefore it is only natural in me to care about money. To handle money is my business; to make it is my duty. To grow rich is an affair of honour and art with me; and mark my words, James Stapleton, one of these days I'll be as rich as any man in these parts."

Had James Stapleton been a shrewd discerner of character, he would have learnt from the tone of the speaker's voice, no less than from the conspicuous absence of unalterable resolve from the speaker's face, that this declaration of vulgar ambition came from the boastfulness of a vain, rather than from the deliberate purpose of a determined nature. But the surgeon, being neither a keen student nor severe censor of his companions, was content with the obvious meaning of Herrick's words; and instead of feeling any inclination to quarrel with him for the meanness of his ambition, he was well pleased to admire in his friend that which he would have scorned in himself.

"A rich man is what you will be and ought to be—and very naturally wish to be—of course it is," rolled the deep thunder of James Stapleton's jolly voice. "Your father meant you, your

uncle means you to be a rich man ; and if you had not clearly and strongly determined to carry out their wishes, you would be wanting in duty to them, and what's more, in affection to your brothers and sister, who look to you to keep up the family dignity for them, and whose children will of course come to you, as their powerful uncle, for countenance and assistance years hence. You are the head of a family, and as such, are bound to make a great fortune, for others rather than yourself. And unless I am mistaken, Herrick, before many years have passed you'll hold up your head at Coote Hall, and bring the proudest families of the Border about you. Why shouldn't you ? The Kingsford blood is as good as any in the three shires ; your uncle and your poor dear father have often told me so. And though I say it to your face," continued James Stapleton in an enthusiasm of admiration for his familiar friend, "the whole Border can't show a better looking gentleman, or a better friend, or a more telling speaker at a public meeting than Herrick Kingsford of Carlton Cross. Of course you'll be a rich man. If you don't make yourself one of the first squires in these parts, hang me if you wont be guilty of downright inhumanity to your family

and treason to your ancestors. But my game—aha! *my* game—will be a much more modest affair.”

“What will content you?” inquired Herrick, to whom the surgeon’s sincere and extravagant praise was far sweeter than any adulation, albeit Herrick Kingsford could enjoy flattery in default of honest commendation, and in his greed of approbation preserved a keen appetite for the compliments of impudent servility.

“To be just what my fathers have been for six generations in this town—nothing more, nothing less.”

“Well, Jem, you’ll be that; and if I say that you are made for something better, it is not because I underrate their respectability, or the importance of a doctor’s work.”

“I want nothing better,” rejoined James Stapleton, earnestly, but without a sign of anger or any other kind of intemperance. “Just now I said that I had not time to be proud about anything; but in a happy, jolly, sentimental fashion I am proud of my professional pedigree. You say I ought to be proud of my mother because she’s a Howlett; but though I could kiss the ground she walks on, it is scarcely once in a twelvemonth that I remember of my accord

that she was a Howlett. But there is a satisfaction—that stirs my heart and warms it like good wine—in thinking that we Stapletons have been doctors here ever since Charles the First's time. When I look at the gravestones of the six doctors in the cloisters of our old church yonder, father and son, and father and son, and father and son, ending with my dear father, who was a *rare* man, it is as good as reading a poem to imagine all the scenes of domestic joy and sorrow, suffering and heroism, in which they played the same parts amongst the men and women whose descendants are the men and women whom I do my best to comfort in sickness and encourage in dejection. As I drive about the country, along windy uplands, or over purple moors, through rain or sleet or cheery sunshine, it makes me feel the honour of my business to reflect—how, for two hundred years and more, we Stapletons have been in the thick of the fight whenever and wherever disease has broken out in these parts; how the simple folk of the Border villages, when fever has been raging in their dwellings, have listened for our wheels or the beat of our horses' feet, and hailed us, as we came into their streets with cries of joy, as though we were saviours able to pluck them from

the jaws of death! And when I cross the threshold of a big county house, and am brought face to face with grand people who don't distinguish much between a country apothecary and a gamekeeper, it puts pluck into my heart and nerve into my hand to think—'Ah! my Lord So-and-so, I am the doctor, and know more about the secrets of your house than you know yourself; and if it had not been for my father, or grandfather, or great-grandfather, as the case may be, you'd never have come into the world to own these broad acres and this grand hall, and be a leading man in the three counties.' It is when I look at my business in this way that I wouldn't exchange lots with any man, but feel that it will be quite glory enough for me when I come to my deathbed to be able to say that I have done my duty in the same line of labour, as zealously if not as well, as my forefathers. You see, Herrick, my lad, there's a romantic side to a country apothecary's business."

"See it? I should think I do, Jem. You talk as if I looked down upon it. Why, think and tell me, haven't I often said that I should like to be your partner, if the life was only something less rough?"

"Something less rough?" quickly rejoined

James Stapleton, the deep sonorous melody of his singular voice rolling now like organ music, now like drums beating to battle. "Why, the roughness is the beauty of it, sir! In the summer, when the sun doctors the poor folk, and during harvest, when farm people haven't time to be ill, my life is mere holiday, and no fit occupation for an able-bodied man. I declare at such times I grow quite ashamed of myself as I slip about the Border in the saddle, spinning out the little I have to do, and vainly trying to persuade myself that I am not an idler. It's in the rough seasons, when the rough work comes, that I am happiest. And sometimes it is the roughest of rough—you're right in thinking it so. I am not bragging about myself, for I have a rare good fellow for an assistant, and four nags of the right sort, and whatever I do they do, whatever I endure they endure, and what's more, they like it just as much as I do. My assistant has an eye and a tooth for disease. Believe me, that man hunts an epidemic as a dog hunts a rat. *He* knows what rough work is if any man does. If you were my assistant for the six winter months you would not like the life at first; but you would soon fit yourself to it. People who aren't in the run, don't know, can't imagine

what the sport is. 'How hard it is, doctor, that you must leave us before you've had so much as a piece of fish,' ladies say to me when I am called away from a dinner-party. But it isn't hard at all. It's far better than six courses and a bottle of '15 to know that the world can't get on without laying it into you hard and sharp. You feel you're of some use in the world when you're pulled in six different directions to six different cases, lying wide apart, with plenty of hailstorm and thunder between them. It puts the soldier into you, and brings the soldier out of you, to be up night after night, knowing that you haven't slept out of your boots for ten days, and feeling sure that ten days more must pass before you'll spend eight hours off in your own feather-bed. It puts the soldier into you to turn out of your warm blankets somewhere in the small hours of a winter's morning in answer to a ring at your night-bell, and make your way for eight miles in the teeth of a north-east wind over heath and common, when it is so dark that you can't see your own fingers, and have no choice but to give your horse his head, and put your trust in Providence and the animal's eyesight. Ay, and it puts the soldier into you to come home after a long round in a March thaw, hungry as a hunter,

and licking your lips over anticipations of a hot dinner, and before you've entered your house to be met with a notice that you must start again for a house just two miles beyond the farthest point from which you've just come on your homeward journey; in which case there is nothing for it but to bolt your provender like a beast of prey, write out your prescriptions for your dispenser, change your wet coat for a damp one, and turn out once more, with a fresh horse and your best gig-lamps. That's the kind of time, my lad, when you see the worst side of your own temper, and learn the use of a light sulky, a double-caped overcoat, and nag that can trot sixteen miles an hour."

"That's the game!" exclaimed Herrick, in a voice that accorded with his friend's enthusiasm; "and a man must be made of sound stuff to play it out." After a pause, the lawyer added, "Ah, you doctors ought to be well paid."

At which compliment James Stapleton's drums beat off again—"But that's what we ain't. Sometimes, no doubt, we get good wages, and taking the year through we manage to fare as well as our neighbours; but on occasions the pay is wretched bad—ay, far worse than you can suppose. Many a day the girls, looking out of their

windows in the High-street in the morning, say, 'There's the doctor off into the country,' and eight hours after, when they see me return, they think to themselves, 'Here he is back again: he has been out all day. What a fortune he is making!' Bless me! perhaps six out of the eight hours have been spent by the bedside of a pauper's wife, who has had such a cruel hard and perilous labour, that I couldn't in conscience leave her to my assistant, knowing that a gentleman's wife in like trouble would never speak to me again if I didn't keep by her side till it was all over. Six hours in a workman's stuffy chamber, the sweat rolling down your face as if you were a nigger in a sugar factory, and death all the time grinning at you over the grimy cover of the poor creature's hard mattress, and all the payment—ten shillings and sixpence from the union! And there's worse paid work than that for me—work done for honest struggling mortals: so poor that they can barely keep the wolf from the door, and yet so proud that they'd die of starvation rather than fall upon the parish. They're the sort of folk for whom I feel, 'There, I'll do my best, and if I ever press you for a sixpence of your narrow means, may I turn a maniac and die eating my own flesh!' But then the man

who does his duty by the poor gets something better than money for his wages. The reward comes when he sees the women of the villages run out of their cottages at the noise of his wheels, to curtsy and stare after him with grateful eyes ; when he hears the children raise a cheer at the school-house for the doctor who pulled them out of the bad fever ; when the men in white smocks smile at him from their teeth to their eyelids, as they put their horny hands to their forelocks. And I am inclined to think, Herrick, that not the least part of his reward comes when the grateful creatures trudge from hamlet and glen to see him lowered to his last resting-place, and to mutter simple prayers and rude blessings over his open grave."

"As they did, old boy, something less than twelve years since," observed Herrick Kingsford, with genuine emotion.

"Yes," assented James Stapleton, in the lowest and mellowest roll of his deep voice, "as they did then. Ah, time flies fast ! A few more months, and my dear father will have been dead twelve years."

A pause, during which James Stapleton's excitement partially subsided.

"So you see," he remarked, in a tone that

seemed to apologize for the egotism and warmth of his previous utterances, "I am exactly cut out for my place here, and quite content to fill it. If I haven't yet got everything I desire, I am in a fair way to get it."

"Every wish of your heart, Master Jem, wont be gratified till you've a wife and a brood of comely children in this house, which, by the way, is big enough for a large family."

It was a simple speech, made without any hidden design; but it struck a delicate chord of James Stapleton's heart, creating in his breast a sudden disturbance that was visible in his heightened colour and the electric brilliance of his burning eyes.

Seeing this disturbance, Herrick Kingsford laughed aloud, partly in pleasure at having unintentionally made so good a hit, and partly through mischievous delight at his friend's confusion.

"Jem, Jem! how you're blushing! and there's your hand beginning to shake," cried Herrick, merrily. "I thought I knew all about you, and I have had you under my eye for a long time past; but you're even further gone than I supposed."

"Then you know all about it?" exclaimed James Stapleton, in his simplicity revealing a

secret which he had carefully nursed in his own breast for many a month—ay, for many a year, and which three minutes earlier Herrick had not even so much as suspected.

“It is not my business to *know* anything on such a subject till you see fit to take me into your confidence. I have watched you, and come to my own conclusions, but I have never hinted them to man or woman; and more than once I have said to myself, ‘Until Jem makes a clean breast of it to me, I’ll not make a sign that after all he has not much to communicate,’” replied Herrick, persisting in a misrepresentation which he had made partly at the instigation of a vain desire to astonish his friend, and partly because at the moment when his curiosity was first aroused by James Stapleton’s agitation, he saw that the best way to bring the surgeon to a full confession was to create in him an impression that he had just nothing to reveal. Hence vanity and cunning—two qualities that were important elements in his moral constitution—conspired to render Herrick guilty of misstatements for which he was more than adequately punished ere many days had passed.

“But,” he added, with a dexterous assumption of delicacy, pique, and unwillingness to pursue a

subject on which his friend was pleased to maintain a reserve, "don't tell me more than you wish. If you think it best to be cautious towards me, pray be so. I am not the man to force you into fuller confidence in me."

In an instant these cleverly administered pricks had the desired effect on the surgeon's generous and affectionate nature.

Rising quickly from his chair, he shut the window and pulled down the blind. Having thus secured a greater degree of privacy to the consulting-room, he opened the door, and, by a quick survey of the hall and passages, satisfied himself that neither his assistant nor his servants were within hearing. These measures having been taken against eavesdroppers and listeners, James Stapleton slipped the bolt of the door, and then hastily drew to his side Herrick Kingsford, who had left his seat and watched his friend's precautionary operations with lively amusement.

"He's in love; that he admits. Who is she, I wonder?" was the thought that occupied Herrick's mind, as he stood in the middle of the consulting-room, feeling painfully minute by the side of the tall surgeon, who grasped him with convulsive hands, and looked down into his face with a strange light in his bright brown eyes.

“ You are right, Herrick ; I am in love, and have been in love for many a day, though I have not dared to admit as much to you before to-night, or even to myself, until quite lately. It’s only recently that I have been in a position to marry, or even to think about it ; and so I have put a curb on my imagination, and haven’t allowed myself to acknowledge to myself how completely I am at her mercy. I felt myself bound in honour not to make her an offer until I had freed myself from debt, and done all I was bound to do for my own family. But now there’s no reason why I should put a restraint on myself any longer ; and ere many more days have passed I mean to say to Bessie Clayton——”

As the name passed James Stapleton’s lips Herrick suddenly started backwards a full foot’s space, and gave a quick, sharp cry, that was not less expressive of astonishment than of pain. Had not James Stapleton been altogether engrossed by his own excitement and the contemplation of his own sentimental interest, he could not have failed to observe the singular and suspicious effect of his communication on Herrick. At least he would have seen that Herrick had been guilty of artifice in taking credit to himself for having detected the secret which, now that it

was put in words, caused him such manifest surprise and disturbance. But James Stapleton was in a frame of mind that disqualified him for taking accurate observation of the world around him; and instead of being struck by Herrick's conduct, he neither noticed his recoil nor heard his ejaculation.

When James Stapleton had completed his avowal, he added after a pause—

“So you suspected my secret? You discovered it—did you, Herrick?”

“Yes,” gasped Herrick, dropping into a chair, and striving to recover his self-possession whilst he repeated the falsehood into which he had been betrayed by vanity and cunning—a falsehood of which he bitterly repented when, after the lapse of a few days, he reflected on the occurrences of the evening. “The first thing that made me think how matters were going was your habit of looking at Miss Clayton in church.”

James Stapleton inquired with a laugh how long a time had elapsed since Herrick had first noticed this suspicious habit; and on Herrick answering that full two years had passed since his first observation of the sentimental gaze, honest James Stapleton laughed jollily, proclaimed Herrick a “monstrous 'cute fellow,” and

thanked his stars that Carlton Cross contained only one such lynx-eyed observer.

And whilst James Stapleton's mellow laughter rolled from wall to ceiling, Herrick became calm again, and lost the pallor which seized his face at the utterance of Bessie Clayton's name.

CHAPTER V.

Wherein Herrick ascertains the State of the Case.

“**S**INCE you knew my story before I told it to you, and consequently are not overcome with surprise at my announcement,” said James Stapleton, resuming the conversation when he had taken a chair by Herrick’s side, “you can give me your cool, dispassionate judgment on my choice.”

“My dear boy, it is needless to say I congratulate you,” returned Herrick, with an appearance of cordial sympathy and satisfaction.

“Nay, nay,” interposed James Stapleton quickly, a shudder running through his body and causing his voice to quaver; “not so fast, Herrick. It’s ill for a man to sing a song of triumph till he has taken off his harness, or to be hailed victor before he has won the battle. If you congratulate me now your words will seem ominous of disaster. Wait for a few days, and then if Bessie will have me I’ll thank you for making me blush with kind speeches.”

“ I do not congratulate you on her choice, but on your own,” replied Herrick, with an outward placidity that was the result of strong internal effort. “ If I saw you fixing your affections on a girl who would be sure to make your life wretched after she had been married to you, I should experience such acute concern that I should most likely be foolish enough to spoil our friendship by expostulating with you on your folly. Surely then it is only reasonable that I should be glad and speak words of encouragement when I know that you are bent on winning such a woman as Miss Clayton. A happy marriage is the brightest success that man can achieve, and the first step to a happy marriage is the wise selection of a sweetheart. I congratulate you on having made that important step. Anyhow you have started right.”

Though James Stapleton had laughed with his customary heartiness over his friend’s wonderful sagacity in detecting the secret which had in fact been successfully guarded from his eyes, his boisterous merriment did not relieve him of the agitation consequent on the effort with which he had revealed the hope of his heart. In his ordinary state of mind he would not have failed to detect a note of constraint in the voice, an

air of suspicious watchfulness in the manner, an indication of insincerity in the cumbrous and verbose structure of Herrick's last speech. But so completely had egotistic excitement gained for the time a mastery over all his faculties that he had neither inclination nor power to be critical with respect to his friend's language and demeanour.

“ I am glad you think so. Of course on such a matter I am not without proper confidence in my own judgment; but still, Herrick, it is pleasant to hear one's judgment confirmed. I must say it would have surprised me if you had not thought highly of my choice; for, Herrick—” and here James Stapleton's voice began once more to tremble with emotion, “ she is so lovely, so good, so rarely and unspeakably rich in every womanly charm, that though I am not without reasons for hoping the best, I can scarcely believe that she will condescend to take my love and—return it. I am such a huge, awkward, clumsy brute, Herrick; and she is so gentle, and soft, and winsome! It seems incredible that she'll not run away in a panic of fright when I ask her outright to be my wife. When I looked at myself last night in my toilet-table glass—it's a beastly bad glass, mind you,

and makes every body look more or less grim and heavy and detestable—I was really quite scared at my own likeness. It seemed to me that any brutal ogre of a fairy tale bent on carrying a lovely princess off to his castle, was a comely and modest fellow in comparison with me and my design on Bessie Clayton. I am not so vain a man, Herrick, as to desire good looks for my own sake ; but for Bessie's sake, if she is to be my wife, I do wish that I could make myself a little better looking. I wish my hands were just as white, and my face half as delicate and comely as yours."

Whereat Herrick, with an almost natural laugh, exclaimed, "I see you are thoroughly in love. Just in proportion to the violence of their passion men grow modest and dissatisfied with themselves when they are in love. But take my word for it, Jem, you're handsome enough to win a lovely woman. If Miss Clayton should refuse you, she wont do so because your face is ugly. Don't turn to that glass, there—it is worse than the one in your bedroom ; and don't think any more about your personal appearance. Since you have begun to be communicative, extend your confidence, and tell me exactly how matters stand between you and the lady."

“That’s more than I can do. So far as my feelings are concerned, I can make an exact statement of the case. But I cannot venture to say what may be her wishes and intentions.”

“You can’t? But just now you said you had reasons for hoping for the best. What are your grounds for hope?” asked Herrick sharply, as though he were cross-examining a witness.

Whereupon James Stapleton blushed and answered evasively, “Surely my love is a sufficient justification of its hope.”

“I mean what encouragement has she given you?”

“Encouragement!” cried the surgeon, with a note of astonishment and displeasure in his voice. “You don’t imagine that Bessie Clayton would *encourage* me or any other man! It would be impossible for her to do anything so unwomanly and indelicate. She is not a coquette, or a flirt, or anything but the simplest——”

“What a marvellous fellow you are!” broke in Herrick. “Yours must be a sanguine temperament. She has never given you any encouragement, and yet you conceive yourself to have grounds for hoping the best.”

“She has never given me any encouragement in the sense in which you use the word,” ex-

plained James Stapleton, blushing again, and exhibiting ludicrous signs of embarrassment; "but she has said and done things that are very encouraging. You understand me?"

"Quite."

"I am a constant visitor at her uncle's house. Scarcely a day passes that does not see me cross Mr. Kilderbee's threshold. Sometimes I am in and out of his place two or three times a day. And I notice—mind, Herrick, I don't venture to suggest that Bessie Clayton has compromised herself in any way; I confine myself strictly to what I notice, without hinting that she has any purpose in what I notice. Well, then, I observe—or rather, I think I observe—that her face always brightens when I come upon her, and that she invariably seems pleased to see me. Now that's encouraging."

"Very."

"Then again, years since, when I first set up in practice and she was only a child—not more than fourteen to my twenty-two—I fell into the habit of calling her by her Christian name, and she has never intimated that she wished me to adopt a less familiar style of addressing her. Once—some twelve months since—more from accident than design, I called her Miss Clayton

when speaking to her, and a look of pain and surprise crossed her face as she inquired if I had displeased her in any way. And then she asked me in her uncle's presence never to give up my old way of calling her Bessie. And that's very encouraging."

"No doubt! Does she in return call you James?"

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Herrick."

"Well, she will call you James sooner or later I trust."

"I hope so."

"Then I may understand that you are on terms of close intercourse and affectionate confidence with her, but that your familiarity is something less tender and unreserved than the familiarity of lovers."

"In point of fact we are like brother and sister, only that she does not address me by my Christian name, and that while I behave like her brother I feel like her lover."

"She knows your secret?"

"I have tried to make her know it, as far as I thought right and prudent. I have never spoken to her outright, but she must see my game; and though of course she is incapable of doing anything to draw me on, as an ordinary

girl might, she is just as trustful to me as ever, and quite as much my sister as ever. Nearly every other night I drop in at Mr. Kilderbee's house to play a rubber of cribbage with the old gentleman, or for a few hits of backgammon; but last week I was so fully occupied that three nights passed without a game. I could not even find time to run into Green Villa for five minutes' chat. Well, when I at length made my appearance with an apology on my lips, before I could get out a word of explanation Bessie took me to task for my remissness, and frankly told me that her evenings, as well as her uncle's, went all the pleasanter for my visits. Now that again is very encouraging."

"Will you meet with any opposition from the old man?"

"Why should I?"

"Humph! He is a cross-grained, crotchety, cantankerous old fellow, popular enough with the dissenters and radicals, because he is rich and clever enough to show them the best way of playing their cards. Of late years his influence has grown and his standing has improved, and in a certain way he is looked up to by a certain set; but there was a time, you know, James,

when old Kilderbee's name didn't stand very high in this part of the world."

"Pooh! he is your political opponent and the steady antagonist of your uncle, so you can't bring yourself to render him justice," James Stapleton answered, stoutly. "He is sometimes violent out of doors, and bitterly sarcastic; but he is a fine-natured old gentleman, and to those for whom he takes a fancy he is as gentle as a woman and as munificent as a prince. If you knew him intimately you would not think him a curmudgeon."

"What a dutiful nephew you'll prove to the old man!" rejoined Herrick, with a light laugh and a momentary sneer, that would have ruffled James Stapleton's temper had he been less imperturbably good natured.

"I will, if he will let me," was the surgeon's simple answer. "And in the meantime I know that I owe him a deep debt of gratitude, and if he should refuse to give me his niece, I would not change my tone with regard to him; but—but——"

"Would take her without his leave?"

"Not during his life. My debt to Mr. Kilderbee is no ordinary obligation."

"No doubt; he has been of great service to

you. He has brought you many a good patient, and he lent you money at a time when you greatly needed such assistance and could not have commanded it in the market. I see all that. Indeed, Jem, if you were not the sort of fellow who could work your way to prosperity under any circumstances, I should say that in a certain sense the old man had been the making of you."

"He did far more for me," returned James Stapleton, raising his voice and speaking with generous fervour; "he gave me the prosperity which I enjoy, and, much more,—he preserved my father's honour and saved the good name and happiness of my family! We were worse off than even you know or imagine, Herrick, when my dear father died of a malady that would have ended fatally under any circumstances, but was quickened in its course by cruel anxiety for his wife and children. He had never been a prudent or saving man: he was hospitable, and free with his money abroad as well as at home; and then those wretched speculations at East Winstead ruined his fortune and gave him his death-blow. There was a hideous state of things: a widow and five children left worse than penniless, creditors in the borough for whom my father's estate

would not yield half-a-crown in the pound, I, the eldest of the five children, still only a medical student, without a diploma entitling me to practise my profession. Ruin stared us in the face, and in order that no one might say we did not do our utmost for the creditors, I had already begun to look for a successor to the practice which had been ours for six generations. It was then, while my father still lay dead in this house, that your 'cross-grained, crotchety, cantankerous old man' came to us. He wouldn't let us sell the practice, or make a composition with our creditors, or change in any way our mode of living. He gave me the money to pay my father's debts in full, he arranged my father's funeral on a scale of perhaps improper ostentation and insisted on defraying its cost, and lastly, he gave me a thousand pounds, saying, 'There, boy, tell your mother to make herself easy about money, and that she can have as much more as she wants. Let an assistant keep the practice together as he best can for the next six months, and then, as soon as you are qualified, do you come down and settle here. Of course a good many of the patients will leave, and at first you'll be thought a mere boy; but you'll have the Stapleton name to draw your

father's patients back to you—and what's more, they'll soon find out that you are made of true Stapleton stuff.' ”

At this point James Stapleton paused to draw breath; but without any needless delay he resumed his story—

“ They were his words, and they were deuced complimentary words—too flattering, of course, to me, but meant most kindly. His counsel was no less sound than his help was generous. As soon as I was ‘qualified’ I invited my father's old patients to rally round me. Of course the practice had greatly diminished in the interval between my father's death and my return. All the appointments had gone: Trembleby had got ‘the parishes;’ the trustees of the Magpie Charity had elected Donkin as my father's successor; and some of the old county families had sent for Donkin. I came down here, Herrick, with rather a faint heart. I could not persuade myself that I could get the confidence of people who could remember me a mischievous school-boy; but there was no other choice. If there had been any opening elsewhere by which I could have hoped to win a sufficient income I should have taken it; but Carlton Cross was the only place where I could hope to earn bread and

cheese for myself, and keep a house over my mother's head. Well, I came, and notwithstanding the cordial support which I received from some of my friends from the very first (your father and uncle amongst them), I can't account for my success—I really can't account for it. It has been so great that it astonishes me the more I think about it. Mr. Kilderbee went about amongst his friends and regularly pulled them in this consulting-room. Then people came to me who felt themselves under a debt of gratitude to my father. As soon as Trembleby died the practice recovered 'the parishes;' and though Donkin is still doctor to the Magpie Charity I have no great fear that I shan't sooner or later get that preferment. And then, how we have prospered during these twelve years! Peter doing right well as a lawyer at Market Leiston; Lemuel already a partner in a flourishing concern at Birmingham; Jenny and Flo both well married; and all the pecuniary part of my debt to Mr. Kilderbee paid off, with the exception of a sum which I shall place in his hands on quarter-day."

"Then you've repaid him?"

"I soon shall have repaid him, principal and interest. Of course I could do no less than

regard his money as a loan, and pay it off as soon as possible, though he wished me to accept it as a gift. And when I shall have quite freed myself from my incumbrances : that is, on quarter-day—I shall say, ‘ Mr. Kilderbee, now that I have repaid you all the money you lent me, I feel myself in a position to ask you to give me your niece ; that is, to let me do my best to win her.’ ”

“ You are quite right there,” interposed Herrick, his eyes twinkling as he spoke, “ in determining to speak to the old man before you make your offer to the young lady.”

“ No man of honour could think of doing otherwise,” replied James Stapleton in a tone that gave Herrick an unpleasant sensation in the left side of his chest. “ I maintain that no man can honourably bind a girl by a promise of marriage until he has obtained express permission to do so from her parents, or those who stand to her in the place of parents. So far as this matter is concerned, I regard Bessie as Mr. Kilderbee’s daughter ; and I should not have ventured to indicate in any way to Bessie the interest I take in her if I had not good reason for feeling sure that her uncle will say ‘ yes’ when I ask if I may make her an offer.”

“ You are quite confident on that point ? ”

“ As to his approval of my suit ? How can I be otherwise than confident since he has given me so many marks of his favour ? ”

“ You know something about human nature, ” returned Herrick, with a laugh. “ In behalf of those for whom we’ve done much we like to do more ; and as you are certain to meet with no refusal from him, it would be very foolish of you not to pay him the compliment of a preliminary communication—the more so as she is her uncle’s presumptive heiress. ” After a brief pause—“ She’ll bring you a nice lot of money, Jem. ”

Something like an oath escaped James Stapleton’s lips, and his entire body made a convulsive movement ; after which expressions of uneasiness and repugnance he exclaimed roughly—

“ What are you thinking of, Herrick ? For heaven’s sake don’t talk in that way. I do assure you that such a thought has never crossed my mind before, and that now you have put it there, it’ll very likely trouble me for years to come. Pshaw ! you’d make me out a fortune-hunter. ” And he added, as the other aspect of the question brought relief to his conscience and brightness to his face, “ She has not a single penny of her own ; and though Mr. Kilderbee

was so generous to me, I am by no means certain that he is a rich man."

"I *know* that he can't have less than twenty thousand pounds," replied Herrick, with the authoritative voice of a man speaking from special knowledge.

"It doesn't follow that he will leave it to his niece."

"It does follow that she'll have it at his death, or that he is not such an exemplary old boy as you make him out to be."

"I'll beg him to settle the whole on trustees for her use, so that I can't touch a penny of it."

"You'd better not—perhaps he'll take you at your word," rejoined Herrick, with a grimace that indicated how unpalatable such an arrangement would be to him, if he were to marry a fortune.

"Well, Herrick,—well, well!" observed James Stapleton; and the tone in which he repeated the monosyllable showed that he did not think at all well of the turn into which the conversation had drifted, or been forced.

To comply with his friend's humour, Herrick ceased to regard the interesting topic from a sordid point of view, and proceeded to bring up fresh considerations by asking—

“What does Mrs. Stapleton say to your selection? Does she approve it?”

“She does not know or even suspect it.”

“Indeed!”

“Having determined to keep my own counsel till I should be in a position to avow my hopes to Bessie, I have not mentioned the matter to my mother. Indeed, you are the only mortal to whom I have breathed a word on the subject.”

“But you *should* speak to her, old boy,” suggested Herrick, lowering his voice, and speaking with unusual softness and in his most conciliatory tone, whilst he strained the privilege of familiar friendship so far as to bring before the surgeon his filial obligations to the mother whom he admired with all the enthusiasm of his loyal nature. “You should speak to her before you make the final stroke. You may not let her find it out from any lips but your own—not even from Miss Clayton’s or Mr. Kilderbee’s. She has a right to your confidence, and she’d be very much hurt if she should ever have reason to think that you have treated her with distrust. You see, it is a matter which so nearly concerns her, as the present mistress of this house—where she has been mistress for more than thirty years—that it is especially incumbent on you to treat her

without any diminution of your habitual candour. And I am the more certain on this point," continued Herrick, growing bolder as he saw from the surgeon's face that his counsel gave no offence—"as of course there are one or two considerations that may incline her to wish that you had made another selection."

"You can't think that she'll oppose me?" inquired James Stapleton, in his heart grateful for the boldness with which Herrick had thus put his hand on a delicate side of the question, which had already caused him more uneasiness than he had permitted himself to recognise.

"She wont oppose you, but you may perhaps feel that she is dissatisfied; and you are such a good fellow, Jem, that her dissatisfaction will vex you more than the positive opposition of many a mother would vex an ordinary son under like circumstances. Of course she wont altogether like the thought of resigning her place here to a new mistress."

"My marriage," interposed James Stapleton, "would make no difference to her on that score, for she would be mistress here all the same."

"No, no, Jem," returned Herrick, in an expostulatory tone; "not 'all the same;' at least she wouldn't think it, and wont think it 'all the

same.' No doubt she has for years looked forward to the time when she would be called upon to resign the sole control of your establishment, if not to retire from it altogether, on the entrance of your bride ; but still, when the time comes she'll naturally feel sore about the change, so far as it affects herself ; and her soreness wont be diminished by certain circumstances, and—and—but really, Jem, I am walking upon ground where I have no right to place my feet."

"Go on ; don't stop, Herrick. I know what you mean, and yet I should like to hear you say it out fairly."

Thus encouraged, Herrick proceeded to put it out fairly in the following manner: "You see, Jem, as a Howlett of Wrentham, as a daughter of Archdeacon Howlett, she naturally feels very warmly on questions of Church and State, and all that kind of thing. Naturally, she is very antagonistic to dissenters as the enemies of the Established Church ; and to radicals as the calumniators and foes of all people who, by property, or birth, or status, belong to the upper ranks of society. Archdeacon Howlett was a very violent politician, and he educated his children to despise dissenters and radicals ; and there is no doubt that your mother's mind was formed as he wished

it to be. Mind you, I approve of her views: they are my own views; what's more, they have for generations been the views of my family. I detest canting pogrums of every kind and description; and I regard with positive disgust those restless, bumptious, pragmatistical fellows who, though they belong to the veriest tag-rag-and-bobtail of society, persist in meddling with politics on the wrong side—that is to say, against the cause of order and wise government. Now, it's true that Miss Clayton is a Church of England woman, and doubtless she resembles all other right-minded ladies in having a strong attachment to the Church and everything that supports the Church. But her uncle is the leader of the radical faction; her uncle is a dissenter; and, though we have rightly agreed to let bye-gones be bye-gones, and not to judge him for the indiscretions of early years when party warfare ran higher in these parts than it does now, there was a time when Cornelius Kilderbee was so notorious and troublesome a character that the Government had thoughts of prosecuting him, and making him an example to other malcontents. All that happened before you and I were born; but your mother remembers it all, though out of Christian kindness, and also out of gratitude to

a man who had rendered you important services, she may never make an allusion to it. Of course she can't cordially like Cornelius Kilderbee, the chief of those dissenters for whom she has a lively aversion ; and of course she wont at first relish the proposal for a marriage between her son and the niece of a dissenting radical. Am I right ?”

“ She wont altogether like it ; but she'll give me her consent with a blessing upon it when she has had time to think it over, and see that I cannot be made happy otherwise.”

“ No doubt, and that's why you should lose no time in talking about it to Mrs. Stapleton. By telling her what you wish to do, and asking beforehand for her permission to do it, you'll conciliate her, so that she wont like to say anything to hurt you ; but if your first announcement to her on the subject should be that Miss Clayton has accepted your offer of marriage, why, I am inclined to think you'll find her very unyielding. That's my opinion.”

“ And mine also,” cordially assented James Stapleton, “ and I'll take your advice, Herrick. To-morrow, or the next day, I'll break it to my mother. Hullo ! go it—pull it down ! bell-wire is cheap.”

“What a prodigious row that bell makes!” exclaimed Herrick, as the noise of James Stapleton’s night-bell brought their interesting conversation to an abrupt end. “The fellow who is pulling at the handle must be a madman.”

“For the time being,” added James Stapleton, in his jovial fashion, as he rose from his chair and walked towards his surgery. “That’s the performance of an excited husband whose domestic cares and social responsibilities will be speedily increased by the birth of a child. Husbands who have run out at night ‘to fetch the doctor’ to their wives always ring in that fashion. My patient’s husband wont stop from ringing until I open the door, and assure him that ‘he has made some one hear.’ Do you wish for more of the music?”

“Be off, Jem; quick—quick. Anyhow, put an end to that row,” exclaimed Herrick, placing his hands to his ears to block out the sharp peals of tintinnabulation.

In less than two minutes James Stapleton was running to an urgent case in a poor quarter of the town, and Herrick was walking leisurely across the High-street on his return to the bachelor-quarters which he occupied over his professional office, next door to Kingsford’s Bank.

CHAPTER VI.

Priscilla Stapleton, formerly Howlett.

BEFORE twenty hours had elapsed James Stapleton fulfilled his promise to Herrick, and communicated to his mother the secret of his love for Bessie Clayton. Partly because it was his wont to lose no time in making good his words, but still more because now that he had allowed himself to avow to another the state of his affections, he had less power than before to keep his own secret, and restrain his thoughts from playing about it,—he seized the first occasion for taking his mother into his confidence; an occasion that presented itself together with Mrs. Stapleton's tea-equipage at an hour when fashionable people of the present day have seldom commenced their toilets for the dinner-table.

Though the exigencies of professional life rarely permitted James Stapleton the pleasure of joining his mother at the dinner, which, in accordance with the ancient usages of society

in Carlton Cross, she was accustomed to take at an early hour of the afternoon, it was not often that he failed to drink tea with her towards the close of the day. Indeed his intercourse with his mother at this point of the four-and-twenty hours was one of the surgeon's chief enjoyments. To enter her tea-room—drawing-rooms were always called tea-rooms in Carlton Cross, even so late as '32; to approach her with a bow, equally expressive of courteous admiration and filial reverence; to wait for her "My son, pray be seated," before he presumed to take his customary place in a corner of the high-backed sofa that blocked the way between the tea-table and the warmer side of the fireplace; to accept cups of fragrant Bohea from her hands, and in return proffer her the cates of the table with the air of a lover in the presence of his mistress rather than of a son before his mother; to gaze with critical approval at her artistic and in some respects costly costume; to admire the fineness of the lace on her cap, the whiteness and delicacy of the muslin kerchief which she wore folded about her throat; to mark the snowy purity of her gray hair, and the singular clearness of her complexion which three-score and ten years of life had neither bleached nor

robbed of youthful smoothness ; to pass his eyes over the little lady's aquiline profile, dainty lips, plump white hands, and matronly figure ; to flatter himself that neither the Border nor all England could show a fairer, brighter, or more vigorous old woman than Mrs. Stapleton of Carlton Cross—were to Mrs. Stapleton's eldest son matters of habitual demeanour and daily experience.

For, in the estimation of this son, than the comely and imperious lady, who shortly before the close of the last century had borne the name of Priscilla Howlett and become the wife of his father, no more marvellous woman had ever trod the earth since Eve was given to Adam for better and for worse. That no woman had a more complete omniscience with respect to the mysteries of housewifery ; that few members of Hall and College knew more of physic and surgery ; that no divine under the episcopal rank was more deeply read in divinity than his mother, were points of faith on which James Stapleton would have treated denial or doubt as altogether ludicrous. Indeed he was not a little given to boastful and foolish talk about her graces and accomplishments, her judgment and mental parts ; and in years nearer our own time he has been

known to make his wife rather jealous and resentful by extolling the virtues and above all the housewifely skill of his sainted mother, to the manifest disparagement of all wives and mothers of more recent date.

Nor was James Stapleton by any means the only person who was inclined to rate Mrs. Stapleton as something above her real worth. From childhood upwards she had fared royally on praise and adulation ; and from the day when she condescended to enter Carlton Cross as Lemuel Stapleton's bride, the people of that pleasant town had concurred in valuing her as a personage of especial quality, who was not to be confounded with Mrs. Donkin or any other ordinary wife of an ordinary country doctor.

Even before she became a resident of Carlton Cross her reputation throughout the Border lived upon the lips of gossips, who told strange stories of her learning, beauty, and filial devotion to a venerable father. It was said that of all Archdeacon Howlett's children she was by far the most clever ; that having learned Greek and Hebrew in the nursery, she was one of the few persons in all the Border qualified to converse with that erudite Churchman on equal terms ; that at an age when most girls are capa-

ble of no graver pursuit than satin-stitch, she ran clean through the mathematics; that her pen gave the final touches to the archdeacon's Assize Sermon "On Sedition"—ay, more, had given much of the argument and not a little of its literary finish to the archdeacon's pamphlet on "The French Revolution," a work so nearly equal to Mr. Edmund Burke's essay on the same subject, that in many places the two treatises do not differ by so much as a single thought or phrase. It was told how she had declined many eligible offers of matrimony in order that she might be free to minister to her father's failing health; and how throughout his declining years she not only acted as his nurse, but undertook the care of his parishes. Certain it is that even so late as '32 the poorer folk of Wrentham, and Cogford, and Bythesea-in-the-Hole remembered the zeal and singular discretion with which Miss Priscilla Howlett, their rector's daughter, supplied them with medicine and religious consolation in times of sickness, with sharp admonitions and seasonable donations of kitchen-stuff in time of health.

Truth to tell, the people of the Border were not a little surprised at the announcement, following the archdeacon's death with scarce an in-

terval of twelve months, that Miss Priscilla Howlett, who beyond doubt was a member of the "county circle" of the Border, had consented to be the wife of Lemuel Stapleton, the apothecary. In some respects the match was not unsuitable or disadvantageous to the lady. A large and expensive family, together with a strong taste for the pleasures of the table and such other indulgences as public opinion permitted in orthodox divines of the last century, had raised the arch-deacon's annual expenditure so nearly to the amount of his annual income, that he left barely two thousand pounds to his only unmarried child. Of course a settlement in matrimony was desirable for a gentlewoman reduced to this narrow independence, and so far as pecuniary considerations were concerned Lemuel Stapleton was a better match than an average rector of the Border land; but notwithstanding these obvious facts, such was the general estimation of her worth and status, that gossips on all sides asked with significant emphasis how Priscilla Howlett had been induced to bestow her hand on the doctor?

Had the good people of the Border been as sagacious as they believed themselves, they would have seen divers reasons, any one of which would have been sufficient to account for Priscilla's

conduct. At the time of her father's death she was nearly five and thirty years of age—a point of life when single ladies bent on matrimonial settlement have not much time to spend on selection, and are apt to close with any not altogether ineligible proposal. Wishing to remain in the land where she was known and honoured, she was at the same time averse to the thought of maintaining life on a narrow pittance in the same neighbourhood in which she had for several years distributed a bounteous income. Now Lemuel Stapleton's income was a thousand a year, and Carlton Cross within six miles of Wrentham. On the other hand, Lemuel was romantically in love with Miss Priscilla—in love with her beauty, her learning, her birth, in short, with every quality in her possession of which the clever and imperious little lady took especial pride. Nor was she without some of that genuine admiration for Lemuel which is much more likely to develop into wifely love than the "esteem" which, according to Richardsonian novelists, is the warmest sentiment that a modest maiden ought to entertain for her future lord until he has actually made her an offer. She had a true woman's admiration for his strength and abundant energy, his frankness and thorough

goodnature. As her father's health slowly failed, she had grown intimate with and grateful to the doctor, whose interest in his patient was stimulated by his interest in the patient's child. She loved praise, and Lemuel gave her more flattery in a week than any other man had ever given her in a year. If it be true that every man is a physician and a fool by forty, it is no less true that few women wait till they are forty before they come to the conclusion that nature intended them to be physicians. Of all her vain imaginations, faith in her medical skill was the matter on which Priscilla was most exacting of respect, most greedy of praise. Amateur practice in the cottages of Wrentham, Cogford, and Bythesea-in-the-Hole, together with long and continued observation of the archdeacon's gout, had satisfied her that she knew as much about medicine as any common parish doctor. Lemuel, like his son after him, was ever ready to assure her that she knew more than the entire College of Physicians.

So Lemuel and Priscilla married. If he made an unwise choice, he never suspected his blunder; and though it is not probable that she could have achieved a much better match, a belief that she had made a disinterested choice, and could have

settled herself under circumstances of greater prosperity, enhanced the pleasure which she took in reflecting on her social position. To some people prosperity is sweetened, to others it is embittered, by the thought that their good fortune is less than their deserts, and less than it would have been if they had been more prudent and less unselfish: and belonging to the former sort of folk, Mrs. Stapleton was in the first place contented with her lot, and then proud of herself for being so easily satisfied.

But throughout her married life, as also in later years throughout her widowhood, she neither forgot nor permitted others to forget that she was Priscilla, daughter of Archdeacon Howlett. That important fact was commemorated in her dining-room by a case of portly folios of Anglican divinity selected from the archdeacon's library—it was commemorated in her drawing-room by a mezzotint portraiture of the archdeacon in his canonicals, as he appeared when preaching the memorable Assize Sermon "On Sedition"—it was commemorated in her dress by miniature portraitures of the very reverend profile in certain brooches with which she fastened her Indian muslin neckerchiefs—it was commemorated in society by the stateliness with

which she kept dissenters at a distance, and the promptitude with which she led the way in all social movements that tended to the honour of the Established Church.

Throughout Dr. Protheroe's rectorate, there being no Mrs. Protheroe to preside over orthodox society and organize the charitable undertakings of the ladies of the town, Mrs. Stapleton discharged the functions of a rector's wife. She it was who started the Maternity Charity, her pen drew up the rules of the Penny Clothing-club, according as she willed it the mistress of the parochial school for poor girls flourished or passed away. Nor was her influence less dominant in the social circle. At the whist-table and in the country-dance, at stately dinner or festive supper, Mrs. Stapleton was a power to whom the richest of blanket-makers and the warmest of merchants paid willing homage. Even the up-looking Kingsfords, who thought themselves greatly superior to the Stapletons, admitted in their hearts that Archdeacon Howlett's daughter was, to say the least, as good as any lady in Carlton Cross. The ladies of the town may have feared her wit, and stood in awe of her ecclesiastical grandeur; but neither fear nor awe hindered them from sincerely respecting and loving their


little queen. Even at the opening of her widowhood, when sympathy for her loss was six months old, and it was known that Lemuel Stapleton had left her and her five children in very straitened circumstances, no matron of the place hinted that the widow was imprudent to wear as rich silk as any county lady of the Border, or whispered that the mother of five children had better have saved the money which she was known to have spent on Honiton lace, or predicted that Howlett pride would in the long run undo Stapleton honesty. No gossip conjectured how much better Lemuel's children would have been provided for if his wife had been less extravagant. Indeed, notwithstanding the high place amongst the social virtues which the moralists of Carlton Cross accorded to thrift, economy, and pecuniary honour, beholders could not do otherwise than admire the spirit of the little lady who declined to yield an inch to adversity. "For myself," she remarked at this period of trial to some of her more intimate friends, "I have no fear. To be dismayed never was a fashion with the Howletts; but I am anxious for my children whose future is uncertain. My duty is to see my girls and boys through this time of trouble, and of course I shall do my duty."

Her self-confidence was justified by the event.

She saw her children through their domestic trouble, she educated them as she would have educated them had Lemuel remained in the world, and now, in 1832, after marrying her daughters—the one to the first blanket-maker of the town, the other to a rector of the neighbourhood—she sate daily over the late archdeacon's china tea-cups, in the seventy-first year of her age and in full possession of her powers, ready to take her part at short whist or brisk talk, able to walk six miles at a time, or read without spectacles the smallest type of the county paper.

CHAPTER VII.

*Wherein Mrs. Stapleton announces her intention
to retire from Practice.*

“N my seventy-first year,” observed Mrs. Stapleton, raising her right hand and regarding the knots of old-fashioned rings that encumbered its plump white fingers, “I see my way to the end of a not unsuccessful struggle with adversity.”

As the little lady made this declaration she shifted her chair a short distance from the tea-tray, thereby giving the teapot its dismissal, and intimating to her big son that he was not to ask for another of those cups which Cowper described in a line that enthusiastic tea-drinkers persist in misquoting.

“It has been a long struggle, and a tough struggle, but, thank God, mother, not an unsuccessful struggle,” rejoined the big son, leaning forwards from his corner of the high-backed sofa, and preparing to pour upon his mother one of those torrents of admiration and eulogy which

she was accustomed to receive from his lips with unruffled equanimity, as nothing more than the homage due to her character and achievements. "You brought the boat through the storm in gallant and sailor-like fashion, mother; and now that craft and freight have been saved, it is only fair that your merit should be recognised."

"No doubt, Jemmy, no doubt," answered Mrs. Stapleton, declining no part of the commendation. "It is not every woman who, left as I was eleven years since—left with five children, and just no provision but my profession—would have faced all the dangers and difficulties of her position, and helped herself instead of asking help from others."

"No, we never asked help from others, but it came," interposed honest James, whose one dissatisfaction with his idolized mother rose from her disinclination to recognise at its full worth the assistance which she had received from old neighbours in the darkest period of her family trials.

"Naturally, my dear boy, it came; that is to say, strength came from the measures which I had formerly taken to annex people to me, and advantages came from the connexion which I and your dear father brought about us by judicious exertions. No doubt good came from our past action, just as fruit comes to the gar-

dener who uses the pruning-knife, and harvest comes to the husbandman who sows seed in the spring. This was a favourite sentiment with your grandfather, the archdeacon. And as for myself, why should I underrate the consequences of my influence on the fellow-townsmen and patients of my husband? 'Help' is a term that cannot be rightly applied to anything that modified the rigour of those adverse circumstances in which your father's death left me. But call it what you will, it came *unasked*—as you very rightly observe, it came *unasked*—and that is the feature of the case which, notwithstanding your words, never seems to be sufficiently present to your judgment. If we had asked for sympathy and co-operation, the cordiality of our neighbours might have been to their credit, but it certainly would have been no testimony to my worth. To our petitions they might have answered with commiseration; but we were silent—I mean *I* was silent—and in obedience to natural dictates they were not false to me."

As she concluded this statement of the reasons why there was no obligation upon her to cherish gratitude towards those who had rallied round her in the hour of distress, the haughty little

creature signified by a wave of the hand that her son was not to be so presumptuous as to oppose her on this matter. And as that son obeyed the indication by maintaining discreet silence, his heart was less disturbed, and his filial respect less shaken by his mother's apparent ingratitude, than many readers of this page may suppose. For James Stapleton never judged man or woman harshly, and was always more ready to palliate than censure the foibles and waywardness of his companions. He would have been greatly surprised if any one had called him a humorist, and in one sense of that word no term could be more inapplicable to him; but he had the humorist's pleasure in watching diversities of idiosyncrasy, and the humorist's toleration for freaks and passions, which his judgment condemned. Moreover, he knew that his mother's perverse refusal to recognise her old friends as benefactors was more a whim of the lip than of the heart. By her conduct she had proved herself keenly sensitive of the kindness, warmly thankful for the services, of which it was her habitual humour to speak slightly; and knowing her thoroughly, James Stapleton needed no reassurance that her ingenious disparagements of the goodness of her husband's friends were mere

devices by which she schooled her pride to endure the burden of obligations which, in her secret consciousness, she was more prone to magnify than to depreciate. Therefore, whilst he held his tongue, the surgeon was inclined to admire rather than regret that which he was pleased to call his mother's high spirit.

“But though I decline to regard myself,” continued Mrs. Stapleton, “as in any way personally humiliated by the beneficial sympathy of my husband's friends, I trust that I am not insensible to their amiability of intention. I trust also that I do not misrepresent even in my own mind the importance of their friendship. Indeed, in the one instance—the one solitary instance—in which the friendly feeling of my husband's connexion placed me under a distinct and heavy personal obligation, I have never shut my eyes to the nature and weight of the benefit conferred upon me.”

The rising colour of her winning, defiant little face would by itself have shown that her mind was dealing with a delicate matter, even if her words had not indicated the source of her agitation.

“It was a great service,” quickly interposed James Stapleton; “but the friend who rendered it has never permitted us to feel its weight.”

“ Child, foolish child !” responded the old lady, in a higher key, the pink of her face glowing into crimson, and her right hand every now and then angrily tapping the tea-tray as she spoke. “ How could he save me from feeling its weight? how could he spare me the irritating sense of being under an obligation to one of a class of persons for whom I have never professed to entertain any sentiments that were not qualified by antagonism. No doubt he was glad to do us a service : there were good reasons why he should wish to serve your father’s widow and children. Some long, long years have passed; but it seems only a day since poor Lemuel rendered him a service which he was only too glad to repay. The man is grateful—radicals are not altogether incapable of generous emotions;—the man is honest—dissenters *are* honest sometimes;—and he is proud—in their insolent, contumacious fashion radicals and dissenters are the proudest people going. So he repaid your father’s service fully, to the last farthing.”

“ To the very last farthing,” assented James Stapleton.

“ He has paid us with interest.”

“ With handsome interest.”

“ But he has my receipt for it,” continued the

excitable little lady, who, notwithstanding her agitation and the *verve* with which she delivered her utterances, spoke neither stormily nor unmusically. "I thanked him; I wrote him my thanks."

"You could not have done less."

"Under the circumstances, James, I could not have done less," rejoined the mother, her tone becoming suddenly calmer and her voice comically solemn. "But my poor dear father must have turned in his grave when I, his daughter—Archdeacon Howlett's daughter—signed myself, 'Yours very gratefully,' and sent my written acknowledgment of a heavy obligation to Cornelius Kilderbee, the radical wine-merchant—the dissenter who has never ceased to plot for the destruction of the Established Church; the pernicious innovator whom Archdeacon Howlett, as a magistrate, exerted himself to punish; the blasphemous demagogue against whom Archdeacon Howlett, as a divine, directed his sermon 'On Sedition!'"

"Ay, mother—strange things, and worse things than that, happen in this strange world."

"No one knew," continued the little lady, dropping her voice to a lower as well as more impressive note of solemnity, "no one shall ever

know what it cost me to write that letter, or how often that debt has cost me a sleepless night, or how I have longed to wipe it out. From time to time I have reduced it, but hitherto it has not been completely cancelled. You are so thoroughly in my confidence, James ; you know so exactly all the secrets of my affairs, that there is no need to prove to you my inability to cancel this debt sooner. It is true, my nominal income is considerable—but it is a professional income ; and when the unavoidable expenses of my practice have been deducted from my receipts, my clear annual income is not large, for my position and responsibilities.”

“It is only your management,” assented James, “that enables us to do as we do.”

“You see,” explained Mrs. Stapleton, “the prejudices of society and the iniquitous state of the law placed me at a disadvantage. Even nature, by denying me the capacity for endurance and bodily exertion with which she has endowed men, put me at a disadvantage. It was impossible for me to carry on this large practice by myself : the law, the prejudices of society, the infirmities of my sex forbade it, James—absolutely and peremptorily forbade it. I was compelled to keep a visiting assistant as well as a

dispenser. During the few months that intervened between your father's death and the completion of your education, I saw enough to satisfy myself that it would be impossible for me to carry on this practice without a qualified assistant. No doubt, I was singularly fortunate in finding such an assistant as you—a coadjutor whose name and birth have helped me to keep my patients together, whose interests are identical with my own, and whose disposition—I am proud to own it—has always been to strengthen my hands. In every respect you have done your utmost to keep down the expenses of my practice; but, looking at the question in a purely commercial spirit, you cannot fail to see that a practice such as mine is carried on at a disadvantage, when it requires the services of two assistants.”

That she, Archdeacon Howlett's daughter, was the foremost medical practitioner of the Border country; that, so far as her professional interests were concerned, James Stapleton was nothing more than her salaried assistant; that the ancestral practice, which he had recovered and carried forward with singular energy, owed its existence to her skill and exertion; that the money which he had earned, saved, and then spent upon the

nurture, education, and putting out in life of his brothers and sisters, was in reality money which she had so earned, saved, and expended; that the luxurious home which he rescued from bankruptcy, and still afforded her, was the result of her own wisdom and labour; that she showed something more than proper maternal solicitude in making him so extremely comfortable in his own house; and that it was in her power to stop his salary, discharge him, turn him adrift upon the world, at a month's notice;—were certain pleasant misconceptions of the actual state of things, from which Priscilla Stapleton, formerly Howlett, derived a very large proportion of her satisfaction with the world and herself.

Many a son in James Stapleton's situation would have resented such singular misapprehensions; but he was not an ordinary son, and far from regarding with disapprobation his mother's exaggerated estimate of her services for the general prosperity of the family, he took a positive pleasure in thinking how much comfort she derived from it. Had there been any taint of egotism in the surgeon's generous nature, had he cherished a petty though not unamiable ambition to play before his own imagination the part of a domestic hero, he would have fretted

under the injustice and hardship of the matter ; for unquestionably when a young man of warm and honourable affections has fought the battle of life bravely, and has for years stood in the place of father to his younger brothers and sisters—in the place of bread-winner to his aged mother—he has some cause for deeming himself aggrieved if his services do not meet with cordial acknowledgment from the family circle. But Mrs. Stapleton's visiting assistant was not given to think of himself ; and having merely done for his family that which in his eyes appeared to be his duty, he did not on that account wish to be credited with extraordinary virtue, or to be exalted to a domestic pedestal, with his mother at its foot for a worshipper of his noble qualities. It was enough for the honest fellow to know that he had done his best for the " old home ;" and whenever he congratulated himself on the result of his exertions, his thoughts never took the form of self-adulation. Sincerely believing that his mother's personal influence had greatly contributed to his professional success, he thought her fully entitled to the peculiar compensation to which she laid claim—the satisfaction of thinking herself the saviour of her husband's children, and the first medical practitioner of the

Border. Moreover, it is worthy of observation that though his common sense compelled him to recognise the exact nature of his mother's hallucination, and in his own breast to acknowledge that it was a delusion in no small degree indicative of mental unsoundness, he was able on all other questions to maintain his old, habitual, and inordinate respect for her intellectual capacity.

“Consequently,” resumed the little lady, reverting to the circumstance of a loan that was made to her son, not to herself, and alluding to payments which she believed herself to have effected, “I have not been able hitherto to clear off my pecuniary obligation to Mr. Kilderbee; the expenses of my family prevented me from doing so. First, I had to provide for the completion of your education in London.”

“That was not for many months,” interposed James, gravely.

“True,” returned Mrs. Stapleton with corresponding gravity, “not for many months; but still they were months when, in consequence of my inability to provide myself with a suitable assistant, my professional receipts were absolutely nothing. Then I had to provide for Peter and Lemuel. Your brothers' education, and the unavoidable cost of starting them in life, cramped

me sadly for some years ; but I am thankful to say they are doing well. Then there were your sisters ; their lessons and accomplishments ; their outfits for society ; and the expenses attendant upon their very desirable marriages. How *could* I have paid Mr. Kilderbee sooner ? You, James, are not so unreasonable as to think that with due respect to the welfare of my children, I could have paid him sooner ?”

“ I am sure *he* doesn't think you could.”

“ But next quarter-day,” continued the mother, with a voice expressive of keen relish of her honourable intention, “ I shall wipe out every farthing of the residue of that hateful debt ; and thus I shall be in a position to do more for you than I have hitherto been able.”

“ Bless me, mother !” ejaculated James with genuine astonishment, “ what do you mean ?”

“ My dear boy,” explained Mrs. Stapleton, “ your position has not for years been what I could have wished it—in fact, what it should have been, had the calls upon my purse been fewer. You've always been a good, dutiful, industrious boy” (the speaker's voice faltered from emotion) ; “ and such has been your confidence in me that you have never even hinted that you ought to be something better than my assistant !”

“Lord bless you, dear mother,” interposed James, with a jovial note, “what better lot can I wish? You pay me well, you lodge me well, you board me well, you keep the best of horses for me, and really you let me have so much my own way, that sometimes I actually feel as though the practice were my own.”

“Of course, Jem,” responded the mother, with a smile of satisfaction, “I have done my utmost to make the place agreeable to you; and years since I should have admitted you to a partnership in the practice, if justice to my other children had allowed me to do so. But now, after paying Mr. Kilderbee and providing for my other children, I shall be at liberty to put you off in the world.”

“You are not going to discharge me? I don’t want to leave Carlton Cross.”

“You shan’t leave Carlton Cross, but you shall work here on a new footing. You have been man long enough, and now you shall be master.” As she made this remarkable announcement, Mrs. Stapleton raised her voice to a grandeur that corresponded with the magnificence of her intentions. “I have turned the matter over in my mind, and have decided to retire altogether from practice. I mean to

relinquish the whole business to you as a gift, in acknowledgment of your faithful services. I hope, my dear, to enjoy life for many years to come, but I am too old for the incessant anxieties of active practice. So after I have called on Lady Bertha Godsall, and made your position all safe at the rectory, I shall retire in your favour."

"Surely, ma'am, you don't mean to desert me?" inquired James, who was somewhat puzzled by his mother's announcement. As residence in the old house had been her only ostensible connexion with the practice, he fancied for a moment that she might have some wild purpose of retiring from her old quarters. "You wont leave me alone in the old house?"

"No, no, my boy, don't fear that," replied this astounding daughter of an archdeacon, in her most reassuring tone: "I will live on with you till the last, and give you the benefit of my advice in difficult cases, and so on; but when I have once resigned the practice to you, it must be understood that I am to be altogether free from its responsibilities."

It being thus made clear that the contemplated retirement would be a purely imaginary withdrawal from the medical stage, James made

a proper acknowledgment of his mother's munificent resolution, and was about to contemplate the affluence he should enjoy on acquiring what he already possessed, when his benefactress gave a sudden diversion to his thoughts by saying, "And now, James, since you will in a few days be in a position to marry, you *ought* to marry."

"That's exactly what I think, mother," ejaculated James, his heart leaping to his throat as a vision of Bessie Clayton's face floated before his eyes.

"Of course you do," exclaimed the mother in her most vivacious manner, "and I mean you to marry; and what's more, James, I have fixed on the girl for you. So everything is settled."

"What girl, mother? You can't mean——"

"Yes, I do; that's just the girl I mean. In birth, fortune, looks, temper, intelligence, she is just the girl to make you a capital wife, and I have asked her to come and stay with us; and as she has accepted my invitation, you'll soon find an opportunity for putting the question."

James Stapleton was astounded, and as is often the case with astounded gentlemen, he was altogether at fault. It never occurred to him that he was thinking of one young lady, his mother of another.

“Do you actually mean to say that you have asked her to stay in this house?”

“To be sure; and next Tuesday week Emma Harrison will be here.”

“Emma Harrison!” exclaimed James Stapleton, a look of astonishment and dissatisfaction covering his face.

“Certainly.”

“But, mother,” the surgeon dolefully observed, after one or two imperfect utterances, “I have not fallen in love with Emma Harrison.”

Whereupon a ringing peal of clear musical laughter issued from Mrs. Stapleton’s lips, and rising briskly from her seat nigh the Japan tray and the china tea-cups, she came and stood over her son, who still remained upon the sofa, and laying her plump little hand on his great head—confidingly, lovingly, and with an air of patronage, much as a mistress might caress an amiable mastiff—she cried out cheerily, “Of course you have not fallen in love with her. You are too good a boy to fall in love with any one without my leave; but now I give you my leave to make love to Emma Harrison and ask her to be your wife before the end of the year.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A Nice Plan by a Clever Schemer.

THE possibility that her eldest son, like most young bachelors, would at no very distant date conceive the desire to take unto himself a wife, was a contingency on which Mrs. Stapleton had expended more thought than Herrick Kingsford supposed when he urged his friend to lose no time in speaking to her about his contemplated marriage. In his heart Herrick believed that the domineering little lady was resolutely bent on keeping her son a celibate so long as she remained in the world, and that she would regard any proposal to bring a new mistress into his house as a revolutionary and unspeakably dangerous project, to which, as a friend of order and as a "mother in possession," who had no desire to sink into a "mother-in-law on good behaviour," she would feel herself bound to render strenuous opposition.

In this matter Herrick Kingsford was greatly mistaken. Like most women who rule their

families with an appearance of despotic power, and are notably successful in imposing their wishes on all who come within their influence, Mrs. Stapleton was a sagacious person, capable of forming sound judgments on matters affecting her own interests, and not incapable of taking a second place with cheerfulness when it was clear that the highest was designed by fate for some one else. Far from persuading herself that James would never presume to marry in her lifetime, or that, having fixed his affections on any one of the dozen young ladies who were within his reach, he would shape his steps in unreserved submission to his mother's fancies, Mrs. Stapleton, like a prudent general, had resolved to make terms with a force which she knew herself to be unable to withstand, and to anticipate the inevitable with measures that would at least secure her against the most disastrous of its possible consequences. Since it was as certain as any law of nature that her visiting assistant would sooner or later grow weary of his solitary estate, and since, the chances of death set aside, it was no less certain that he would bring home a wife before she was cordially willing to receive her—in short, since it was inevitable, save through the chances already put out of consideration, that

during his mother's life he would throw away his honest heart on somebody, Mrs. Stapleton intended that this somebody should be a docile, dutiful, and complaisant daughter-in-law. The rogue under sentence of whipping could reconcile himself to the thought of his appointed punishment if the Home-office would courteously permit him to make a cat of feathers and floss silk for his broad shoulders. If we must do penance, by all means let us, like the pious sinner of a familiar story, boil our peas beforehand.

So far as legal ability was concerned, Mrs. Stapleton was doubtless free to discharge her visiting assistant on receiving intimation of his resolve to make a young person his wife ; but who is really free to do a tenth, ay, or a hundredth part of that which the law leaves to his discretion. Lawfully the British husband may reduce his wife's pin-money to a ludicrously small amount ; but the British husband is far too clever a fellow to make any such reduction. No Act of Parliament compels us to pay our sons those heavy allowances which we remit to them with extreme reluctance, and yet every quarter-day our sons will continue to receive from us as a matter of course that which is no matter of right on the one side or legal compulsion on the

other. Moreover, in Mrs. Stapleton's case a just perception of her personal interest sided with social influence. As she admitted to her son, no less frankly than she made the same admission to herself, if she discharged her visiting assistant she would find much difficulty in getting an adequate substitute in his place. Nature and society had ordained that she was to walk on peas, so, like a wise lady, she was bent on gathering her own peas and boiling them for her own slippers. Nature and society had made it clear that she was to have a daughter-in-law as a daily companion, and Archdeacon Howlett's daughter was determined that, so far as she could manage, her son's married life should be an affair of her own cooking.

With this purpose in view, Mrs. Stapleton had some years since looked about her for a suitable match for her son James; and after rejecting this young lady for deficiency of breeding, and that young lady for the badness of her connexions, and half-a-dozen other young ladies for dangerous qualities of temper, she had come to the conclusion that Emma Harrison would make an admirable daughter-in-law to the leading medical practitioner of the Border country. Richer girls there were who might have been

drawn for the same end within the domestic circle of the Stapletons ; comelier girls abounded in the three counties to whom the surgeon might have paid his addresses with a good chance of success, but in all England there was no young woman better qualified than Emma Harrison for the part which Mrs. Stapleton had assigned in her imagination to her son's wife. She was a tall and stately, though by no means graceful creature ; unquestionably of ladylike appearance, with a long calm face, pale blue eyes, and colourless hair, but lacking the showy endowments whereby a girl becomes a social power. A well-mannered, well-educated woman, fond of novels, but never neglectful of her domestic duties, rather weak in the logical faculty, but strong beyond the wont of provincial gentlewomen at the piano and water-colours,—Emma possessed three thousand pounds in her own hands, an affectionate disposition, and an agreeable voice. The whole case against her is put with the utmost force when it is recorded that, notwithstanding these important recommendations, and an absence of every kind of positive and definable disqualification, she had reached her twenty-ninth year without having had an offer.

Not without reason was the favour which Mrs.

Stapleton lavished on this hitherto unappreciated lady—of whom it was whispered that no man would ever spontaneously fall in love with her. “Blood is thicker than water,” Mrs. Stapleton had more than once observed to her visiting assistant; “and I must say that, though under any circumstances I should have liked Emma Harrison, I like her all the better because, in a certain kind of way, she is a Howlett;” the full force and generosity of which speech are not apparent whilst it remains to be told that, though Emma Harrison may have been a Howlett in a certain kind of way, there were no grounds for thinking that she had in her veins a single drop of Archdeacon Howlett’s blood.

Throughout the Border it is well known that Archdeacon Howlett’s third son, Captain Howlett, R.N.—familiarily spoken of in “the service” of George the Third’s day as Bob, or Three-Bottle, Howlett—married a widow lady named Harrison, who at the time of her marriage with this Howlett of three-bottle celebrity had a little girl, to whom a select party of godfathers and godmothers had given the name of Emma. Nor is it less notorious throughout the Border that, after the death of Three-Bottle Howlett, this same lady escaped from her second widow-

hood, and found a third papa for her little daughter Emma by marrying, to the lively indignation of the Howlett connexion, a retired upholsterer at Newborough—a cathedral-town just fifty-six miles and three-quarters of a mile distant from the market-place of Carlton Cross. By her union with this retired and reprobated upholsterer, Captain Howlett's widow was effectually severed from that deceased officer's rather arrogant family; but on her death, which occurred some six years after her third marriage, the Howletts were pleased, as they termed it, to accord forgiveness to her memory, and pay attention to the delicate girl for whom, in her childhood, hearty Bob Howlett had conceived a sailor-like fondness.

First of the Howletts to pay Emma Harrison any attention after her mother's death was Mrs. Stapleton, who, whatever may have been her failings, was not deficient in kindness. In her thirteenth year—the age when girls are most apt to magnify the virtues of those elders of their own sex who show them kindness—Emma Harrison, clad in black for her mother, came for a long visit to Carlton Cross. She was encouraged to call Mrs. Stapleton aunt, and Lemuel Stapleton uncle; and from that time, although she was con-

nected with them by no tie of consanguinity, she was "cousin Emma" to the Stapleton children. Touched to the depths of an affectionate heart by this cordial treatment, she repaid it with the gratitude and devotion of which none but young ladies of genuine goodness and a romantic turn of mind are capable. In her opinion such marvellous people as the Stapletons never lived outside the covers of poetry-books. Lemuel Stapleton was the most celebrated doctor in the world; Mrs. Stapleton, as a woman and a Howlett, was unapproachable in beauty, style, learning, moral excellence; of the five children of Lemuel and Priscilla Stapleton there was not one for whom the tall, pale-eyed, undemonstrative girl would not at any moment have sacrificed her right hand. To all save one or two of the few persons who knew her intimately, this girl of colourless hair appeared to be of a cold nature, whilst she was ablaze with the fires of Stapleton-worship; and strange to say, no one was more disposed to take this icy view of her character than the one member of the beloved household to whom she was commended in 1832 as a woman eminently fit to be his wife. Far from falling in love with Emma Harrison, or thinking it possible that he could ever love her, James Stapleton—misjudg-

ing and underrating her as men are apt to misjudge and underrate the women who are secretly thirsting for their good opinion—had quietly settled it in his own mind that Emma Harrison was one of those pleasant and right-minded gentlewomen whom Nature never intended to be wives.

Since that first visit after her mother's death, never a year passed of which Emma did not spend many weeks at Carlton Cross. When Lemuel Stapleton died, the girl wore as deep mourning as the surgeon's daughters. It was not till misfortune first covered her dear friends that Emma, then just nineteen years of age, learnt how much she loved them, and that she loved the eldest son more than all the rest of the family. How that truth revealed itself to her there is no need to say; but readers of this story may be assured that much of the demeanour which James regarded as a sure indication of constitutional coldness was nothing but a veil beneath which she totally concealed from his observation the existence of her pure and ardent love for him. Under these circumstances was it wonderful that Carlton Cross had a strong charm for her? Continuing to pass nine out of every twelve months under the roof of the reprobated upholsterer, calling him her

father, and calling his house her home, just as she called his children her brothers and sisters—(N.B. The retired purveyor of domestic furniture, having married again, had a numerous young family, although he was innocent of children by Bob Howlett's widow)—Emma Harrison in her heart looked upon Carlton Cross as her proper haven. At Newborough she was generally deemed a poor, forlorn, washed-out thing, whose only claim to respect was the assiduity with which she taught her class at the Sunday school, and pursued the arts of piano-music and water-colours. At Carlton Cross she was another creature—formal, stately, and outwardly frigid no doubt; but manifestly cheerful and contented with the world.

However dull they may be at higher tasks, women are for the most part wondrous quick at reading each other's hearts. Without much trouble Mrs. Stapleton, who was quick at any work to which she applied her mind, detected Emma's secret, and, having dexterously shown Emma that it was known to her, made a subtle use of her position to attach the girl even more strongly to her. Between the mother and her simple-minded *protégée* there arose an understanding, brought about by hints and suggestions

rather than compromising words of definite undertaking that would have inevitably begotten humiliating suspicions and fears betwixt them; and though this understanding was never put into language by the keen-witted, scheming mother, it resulted, on Emma's part, in a certainty that her protectress designed her for her daughter-in-law, that James Stapleton would never marry any one without his mother's approval, that eventually, through Mrs. Stapleton's agency, she would win the love of the man whom she loved.


Such an understanding not unfrequently grows up between women who are equal in years; but where no wide difference of age or experience distinguishes the parties to so delicate a compact, the position is fraught with peril to their friendship. As a general rule it may be asserted that a woman never cordially likes the friend of her own sex to whom she feels herself indebted for her husband, or to whom she looks for any special piece of matrimonial advancement. They may maintain an appearance of mutual affection till the wedding-day, but no sooner has Katie secured her prize than she resents the obligation conferred on her by Bessie through whom she has won her game. His mother is the only

woman to whom even the meekest of girls can be indebted for a husband without an insufferable sense of inferiority and humiliation. But, under certain circumstances, for the attainment of her purpose a girl can confide in the mother of the man whom she hopes to win, and can be permanently grateful to that same parent for enabling her to capture him. These circumstances were present in Emma's case. A meek, trustful creature, reared from girlhood to maturity in habitual admiration of her aunt, she experienced no sense of disrespect for James in regarding him as a possession at his mother's disposal, or for herself in being ready to accept him from her hand.

As Mrs. Stapleton wished to secure for the comfort of her declining years a dutiful and devoted daughter-in-law, she could not have made a more judicious selection of a wife for her eldest son. But alas, the best-laid schemes of clever mothers are often frustrated by unlooked-for contingencies.

CHAPTER IX.

Misunderstanding and Amicable Arrangement.

F the various emotions that quickened the action of Mrs. Stapleton's heart when she learnt that her son had, without her leave, fallen in love with a girl for whom she had no especial liking, the strongest and least agreeable were those which arose from an erroneous impression that she had been defeated through her own fault—had lost the race in consequence of her own wilful and needless delay—was in the position of a vanquished player, whereas with less confidence and greater prudence she might have won the game. Had she been less dilatory in making arrangements for her son's marriage; had she some two years, or only twelve months earlier, proposed to him her little plan for his settlement, his wishes would not have been at variance with hers; but now, through her own foolish and selfish procrastination, she was brought to see the destruction of her cherished project. This was the first view

which she took of her case; and it must be owned that it was an opinion little calculated to mitigate the sharpness of her disappointment. That the real facts of the case would have justified her in passing a less uncomplimentary judgment on her own policy, is well known to the readers of this story.

“ You can’t think of such a thing ?” ejaculated the mother, in the helplessness of her surprise repeating her son’s words. “ What can you mean ?”

“ That Emma Harrison can never be my wife,” responded James, telling a part of the truth, whilst he nerved himself to tell the rest. “ I do not love her. I have never thought of her as a person who could under any circumstances become my wife; and though I cherish a strong friendliness and cousinly affection for her, I cannot imagine the state of things that would enable me to care for her as a man ought to care for the woman whom he makes his life-long companion for better and for worse.”

“ My dear child !” rejoined Mrs. Stapleton, as with an uneasy laugh she pretended to make light of her son’s opposition, and hopelessly endeavoured to assert her authority over him with respect to a matter on which he would, of course,

set aside her control—"don't you think *I* know what is best for you? Surely, James, you have not lived in perfect confidence with me so many years, only to learn at this late date that I am a fool about questions concerning which a woman of judgment must know more than any man. Now, Jem, listen to common sense. I know you as well as *you* know *yourself*: even you wont be so mad as to deny that. On the other hand, I know far more about Emma than you can possibly know about her. It is therefore an affair of mathematical demonstration that I am in a better position than you to decide on the entire question."

"But, mother," interposed James.

"Don't interrupt me," cried the excitable little lady, speaking faster in proportion as she saw more fully the hopelessness of her case; "when I was a girl, it was not the fashion for children to interrupt their parents. I tell you the whole Border does not contain a more sensible, or finer principled, or more accomplished, or higher-minded young woman than Emma. She has been a great comfort to me; she is as dear to me almost as any one of my own girls; her affections are bound up in us. And as for you, if you were not blind, like all other men, you would not need

to have me tell you that she loves you passionately."

The vehemence with which these last words were spoken satisfied James of their sincerity.

"I trust that is but a fancy of yours, mother," he rejoined gravely.

"It is no fancy, but the terrible truth," returned the mother. "I tell you she loves you fiercely; and all her coldness and calmness are disguises beneath which she hides her feelings for you. Not a little has she suffered from her efforts to keep you in ignorance of them."

"I am very sorry, mother!"

"Very sorry!" retorted Mrs. Stapleton, with a slight accent of contempt. "You—*you* sorry, because you find yourself honoured with the love of such a woman!"

This thrust made, the indignant mother drew back and put herself on guard.

After a pause, James explained himself, in a tone of impressive commiseration and firmness—
"If you are right in what you say about Emma, I am very sorry for her, because she has thrown away her womanly heart upon a man who very likely is unworthy of it, who most certainly can't return her love."

"But *I require* you to return it, James. Are

my wishes to go for nothing?" dashed in Mrs. Stapleton, with one of those ludicrous outbreaks of despotic petulance in which women sometimes indulge without the excuse of seventy years of age.

"The case is this, mother," said James, goaded into a full confession, "and I am very sorry that I must communicate it at a moment when you are not in a frame of mind to receive it as I could wish—I am in love with Bessie Clayton; I mean to ask her to be my wife; and if she wont have me, why, I shan't be worth any woman's having."

"Bessie Clayton!" exclaimed the imperious daughter of Archdeacon Howlett, straightening her small figure in the chair which she had resumed during the foregoing discussion, and looking at her son with angry eyes; "you cannot mean this thing?"

"Mother, I do. Bessie Clayton must be my wife."

Notwithstanding her eccentricities, Mrs. Stapleton was a lady; notwithstanding her arrogance and vanity, she was a conscientious woman. Hence it was not often that she altogether yielded to a constitutional irritability which, under the few infirmities placed upon her by threescore and ten years, she was less able to con-

trol than she had been in her younger and stronger life. Perhaps it would be scarcely fair to her to say that she ever in the whole course of her existence allowed herself to run into a fit of unqualified and ungovernable rage; but it may be confidently affirmed that on receiving her son's announcement respecting Bessie Clayton she was on the verge of an extremely violent and indecorous fury.

“Have you the impudence, James,” she began, “to tell me that it is your intention to put this affront upon me?—that you are bent on marrying the niece, or whatever else she may be, of that seditious, turbulent dissenter, Kilderbee, the wine-merchant? I tell you, James—I may be angry, but my words spoken now shall be acted upon—I tell you, James, that rather than receive that—that artful hussy, that cunning brat——”

This selection of vituperative terms was by no means happy or worthy of the speaker's command of English; but they stirred James from heart to marrow. It was enough for him to know that his idolized mother was expressing violent disdain for the woman whom he wished to marry; and as the insulting words came hissing from her saucy lips, a shivering ran through his huge frame, and rising to his full height, he turned

down upon his mother the full power of his bright brown eyes.

The expression in those eyes stayed the unseemly language on Mrs. Stapleton's tongue, calmed the tumult of her passion, and in the place of anger filled her with a tenderness not unqualified by fear. Neither aversion, nor resentment, nor defiance animated those eyes, but a look of compassionate sadness for the mother who could be unjust to her own offspring,—a look that said more plainly than words, "Love does not always blind the judgment." Had she wished to rebel against it, she could not have persuaded herself that its insolence or disrespect for her age and position enjoined or justified resistance. Utterly pure of the violence that provokes opposition, and of the conscious superiority that maddens proud natures when they are rebuked by those whom they know themselves to have wronged, it spoke to her sense of justice and womanly duty—it appealed to her maternal love. Only once before had that look been seen by her, and as it now silenced her tongue and subdued her heart, she remembered as distinctly as though it were but yesterday the occasion when those honest, loyal eyes had vanquished her in the same fashion. The great

man was at that time a child, a five years old boy ; and having wrongly accused him of falsehood in respect to a matter about which he had been perfectly truthful, and of stubbornness because he refused to plead guilty to the charge of which he knew his innocence, she had punished him with all the severity of an exploded discipline which delicate and tenderly affectionate mothers, under the influence of a powerful sense of duty and erroneous views respecting parental authority, could nerve themselves to apply to their own offspring so recently as a generation since. Having chastised him for the imputed falsehood, she was about to punish him again for his stubbornness in refusing to admit his guilt, when the little fellow drew himself up, and turned his eyes upon her with a mutely eloquent look, which caused her to stay her hand, and hasten from his presence so that he might not see her in a paroxysm of hysteric weeping, and know how great his power was over her. "It is you who are wrong," the child's look had said ; "of course you can hurt me ; I am quite in your power : how sad a thing it is for her when a mother is unjust to her child !" The man's look now spoke to the same effect.

By such reminders the hearts of women are

strangely stirred, especially the hearts of those women who feel the forces of life failing within them, although their outward aspect may manifest no signs of decay. A glance that recalls the lost beauty of a buried child; a note of music that brings back the melody of the first hymn sung by a darling daughter; a dancing ray that covers a wall with some nursery scene played out half a century ago, and ever since forgotten; the perfume of a flower laden with the joy of an old happiness, or the shame of an old error—these are the influences that change the stony places of an old woman's heart into generous soil, and sow it with the finer qualities of our nature. As Mrs. Stapleton timidly returned her son's gaze, and recalled the morning when she fled from his silent rebuke, her passion subsided; and as she grew tranquil, all the life betwixt the present and that far distant day was laid before her in a succession of vivid recollections: and she saw how much this son had endured, and thought, and done for her. He had conquered her, and she knew it; but far from resenting his assertion of power, or its success, her heart leaped with pride as she saw how completely her imperious will had been overborne by the man whose habitual submissiveness to her control

was sometimes carried beyond the lines of mere filial duty.

“ I am a very foolish woman, James,” said Mrs. Stapleton, making her confession in a broken voice, “ and I am heartily ashamed of myself for putting a fancy of my own before the wishes of my son in a matter that will most likely affect his happiness as long as he lives. If I did not fear to pain you, I’d ask your forgiveness.”

“ Tut—tut! my forgiveness, mother! Now don’t, mother, go on in that way; if you do you’ll make me think I’ve been behaving very badly to you.”

“ Don’t stop me, James,” insisted the mother, eagerly. “ I wont beg your pardon, since you don’t wish me to beg it; but I shan’t rest if you refuse to hear me unsay the words I am ashamed of having spoken about Bessie Clayton. She is a pure, good girl—as lovely a thing in the way of girl as can be found within a day’s journey of the market-cross—charitable and thoughtful towards poor people; and though her uncle is a dissenter, she has always been educated in Church principles. I have not an ill word to speak, or an unkind thought to conceal with respect to her; and when you bring her home

here, there is not a person in the whole Border who wont think you suitably matched."

"Thank you, mother, for that," said James, who had by this time put his arm round her waist, and drawn her to his side on the sofa.

"You see, Jemmy," continued the mother with increasing tenderness of language and voice, "my scheme for marrying you to Emma Harrison—who is a dear, gentle creature, or I should never have thought of her as a proper girl to be your wife—was an old and favourite plan. It is years since the thought occurred to me, and it has so grown upon me, and become almost a part of me, that I could not have seen it set aside and declared a ridiculous impossibility without a few minutes' annoyance, even if I had been accustomed to see my words and wishes made light of. But the fact is, Jemmy, all through life I have been allowed my own way. My dear father never contradicted me; my dear Lemuel never said me 'nay;' and until now you have never seemed capable of having a will of your own on any matter upon which I had decided. I wont say that you've spoilt me between you, or that I should have been a better woman if I had been treated differently; but this I can tell you, no woman likes to be crossed, and an old woman

whose will has been her law all through life is of all women the one who least likes to learn that her will must yield to another's."

There is no saying how long Mrs. Stapleton would have persevered in her penitential acknowledgments and explanations had not James brought them to a close by kissing her on the lips, and creating a diversion of thoughts by the following inquiry :

"But, mother, you just now said something about Emma Harrison having a—a sentimental fondness for me. Were you only putting in strong terms the fact that she has a cousinly liking for me, or have you any reasons for thinking that Emma would not like to hear of my engagement to Bessie?"

"We had better not talk about that, Jemmy," replied Mrs. Stapleton, in a voice of considerable emotion. "I had reason for what I said. But as my scheme is not to be carried out, it would not be fair to Emma, or profitable to either of us, that you and I should gossip about her. If she loves you, she isn't the only woman in the world who wishes for what she can't have. There, there, Jemmy, we have said enough about her for the present. She is a dear girl; and it's enough for you to know that you don't love her."

From which answer James Stapleton derived the unacceptable certainty that his mother's words with respect to Emma had not exceeded the limits of her knowledge, and that he had been so unlucky as to win unawares the devotion of a woman for whom he had never harboured a thought of love or a thought in any degree akin to the sentiment which makes men kneel to women.

"Poor girl! I am very sorry for her," observed James, receiving into his heart a tenderer feeling for Emma than he had at any former time conceived towards her—a sentiment which, if it be love's near relation, as some maintain, is no less closely related to contempt. "I should be humiliated as well as pained by the thought of her trouble, if I could not say with an easy conscience that I never gave her look or word in the hope of making her take an especial interest in me."

"Say no more about her, James," rejoined Mrs. Stapleton, with a sudden resumption of the imperious tone which her defeat had caused her to lay aside for a brief minute. "Even you and I have no right to take liberties with her womanly dignity. Not a word more on that subject."

Whereupon, quitting the forbidden ground, James drew his mother on to speak many loving

wishes for his happiness, and many flattering words about the young lady whom she had so shortly before called an artful hussy and a cunning brat.

“ Ah, mother,” said the son, with a sigh of hope shaken and smothered by apprehension, “ what a fortunate fellow and happy man I shall be if she accepts me ! But, mother, *if she should refuse me !*”

At the bare thought of which disagreeable, not to say unendurable possibility, James Stapleton shuddered throughout his big frame from scalp to sole.

Before these words escaped from his lips, Mrs. Stapleton had risen from the sofa, and as they reached her ear she was on the point of inclining forwards to put a farewell kiss on her boy's forehead.

“ Refuse you !—*if she should refuse you !*” ejaculated the little lady, in her grandest style of Howlett insolence. “ Miss Clayton would hardly have the presumption to refuse an offer from *my* son.”

But in his heart, James was not so sure on that point.

Whilst the impudence of confident lovers is boundless, the fears of modest lovers are manifold ; and unfortunately for his peace of mind, James Stapleton was a modest lover.

CHAPTER X.

Cornelius Kilderbee's "Trotter."

CORNELIUS KILDERBEE, in his day wine merchant of Carlton Cross, and leader of the radicals throughout the Border, has been dead and buried more than a quarter of a century ; but his name still lives in the memory of men who knew him whilst he still remained a political power, and on the lips of many other denizens of the three counties to whom his virtues and eccentricities, his failings and powers, are only matters of tradition. Post-humous fame in the case of an inferior celebrity is so short-lived, that the man who is much spoken of five-and-twenty years after his funeral may be fairly credited with having been a person of no common mark whilst his sands were still running,—at least whilst his strength was in its prime. A few representative men of the first order excepted, what do we remember of the notabilities of George the Third's time—ay, of the notabilities whose names appear in "memoirs,"

and whose acts are abundantly chronicled in the literature of their contemporaries? Of the able men who won distinction in the coteries, and who, after years of honourable exertion in letters or science, in arms or art, in Parliament or the courts, died somewhere about the day when Queen Victoria made her first cry, not one in ten is known beyond the domestic circle of his descendants. Some forty years since a publisher, producing a work that he no doubt thought would be a permanent landmark in literary history, put forth a dictionary of contemporary authors, and it may be safely affirmed that an ordinary educated Englishman of this present day, turning over the leaves of that record of writers, who nearly all entertained at some time or other an ambition for enduring popularity, will not come upon fifty names that are familiar or in any degree known to him. In this respect ignominy and honour fare much alike, the minor criminals, like the minor benefactors of our species, being equally forgotten. A generation after your interment, my most illustrious reader, what will your countrymen know about your state-craft and speeches in the senate, about the flatteries that blind you to your own littleness, and the applause that makes you deaf to the solemn

monitions of fate? Fortunate—supposing posthumous fame a thing to be desired by wise men—will you be if five-and-twenty years after your heir's accession the scene of your ambitious labours and peculiar triumphs shall resound your name as often as the market-hall of Carlton Cross hears mention made of Cornel Kilderbee.

Proverbs and pithy aphorisms without number are fastened upon his reputation, and few matters pertaining to the social life of the Border more deeply impress the stranger than the frequency with which these sayings are repeated, with keen relish and manifest gusto, by the gentry and yeomen, the traders and workmen of the region. At the market ordinaries of the old borough, farmers and blanket dealers wrangling over unsettled bargains, or clacking current news over rum-punch or red port, may be heard spicing their talk in this fashion—

“ Ah! he lost his temper, did he? Then that accounts for it. As old Cornel Kilderbee said, ‘ Catch a wise man in a rage and you’ve a fool in your power!’ ”

“ A pretty sample of sour beer *he* is. Cornel Kilderbee was not far wrong when he said, ‘ A dirty fellow’s money is the dirtiest stuff about him!’ ”

“Come, come, don't be hard on an old customer, but remember Cornel Kilderbee's rule, ‘A good tradesman buys like a Jew and sells like a gentleman!’”

“‘All's fair with a giant, but you can't be too gentle with a dwarf!’ as Cornel Kilderbee said to the county member.”

“‘Hit hard while the fight is on, and when it's over don't bear spite!’ that was old Cornel's rule.”

“He ought to drink less and work more, and think on Cornel's words, ‘The man who's his own enemy is in a fair way to be no one's friend!’”

“Help a neighbour when he's out of luck, and remember old Kilderbee's saying, ‘A poor man's blessing travels farther than a rich man's curse!’”

“‘A blow should leave a mark!’ that was old Cornel's way.”

“‘A man should know how to swear without losing his temper!’ that's what Cornel would say if he was here now.”

“You are a smart fellow at a bargain; so was Cornel Kilderbee—but then he would always help a man to get a living.”

“Don't be after keeping too many irons in the fire. The only Carlton Cross man who could do four things in really tip-top style was Cornel Kilderbee. He could make money, crack jokes,

brew punch, and play the fiddle ; but then he had a cork leg."

" So you're like Cornel Kilderbee, and have an ugly tongue with a rough side to it, have you ? But his tongue had a smooth side for those who wished him well."

In like manner the stranger, paying his first visit to the Border, does not pass many days in Carlton Cross without coming upon conclusive testimony that this pungent speaker of homely wisdom loved his practical joke.

It may be that having put up at the " Cat and Gridiron," the old head-quarters of the Border radicals, the stranger on eating his first dinner in the chief parlour of that antique hostelry will ask the meaning of a remarkable picture that hangs over the fire-place of the aromatic and not luxurious room.

The picture represents two middle-aged men, sitting on slight and unstable chairs, in the middle of a chamber the proportions of which are indicated by lines that declare the artist's manly disregard for the laws of perspective. Each of the middle-aged men deserves attention—the one, an agriculturalist of florid complexion and extensive girth, being chiefly remarkable, so far as costume is concerned, for the

magnitude of the watch-chain and seals that dangle from his fob ; the other, dressed in a high-collared, brass-buttoned, swallow-tail blue coat, tights, and buckled shoes, being noticeable for the depth and amplitude of his white neck-tie, the uncompromising size of his pigtail, and the expression of gleeful smartness that pervades his sharp, thin features. But the most remarkable point in this picture is that—whilst the blue-coated gentleman has his right foot in a keeler of boiling water, the ebullient condition of the fluid being indicated by a puff of vapour upon the canvas, and seems greatly to enjoy the heat—the agriculturalist sits upon his high chair, doubled up with agony caused by a vain endeavour to imitate his friend and keep a bootless foot in the steaming tub. The reader's imagination must furnish the details of the picture.

The "Cat and Gridiron" has a landlord of jolly aspect and rubicund visage—about the last host of the ruddy, jovial, over-eaten, old-fashioned type of innkeepers, who have become merely traditional characters in the England of these abstemious times ; and if any stranger should ask the "Cat and Gridiron's" host for the particulars of the incident commemorated in this work of art, that fat and laughter-loving

entertainer of men with purses in their pockets, will do his best to satisfy a not unreasonable curiosity, and with many chuckles and boisterous guffaws, as though he had never told the story before—indeed, as though he were not telling the story himself, but were hearing it for the first time from the lips of another man—will answer in this wise—

“That gentleman, sir, with the big watch-seals and rather more stomach than he knows how to carry, is Mr. Pratt, of Homerton Grange; leastwise, it was him, only as he’s been dead these thirty year—died of a ’plexy—’t carn’t exactly be said to be him now. But he was a great man in his day, and did a sort in pigs—yes, he did, sir. His was all to nothing the best breed in these parts; and it is so still, although there’s a fashion come up for shorter snouts. Well, sir, t’other genelman was a rare man, Mr. Cornel Kilderbee: that’s how he was always dressed—Lor’ bless you, I remember him well enough. Blue coat, brass buttons, pigtail, gaiters in winter, stockings in summer, black tights the whole year round. There’s a sort would think the like of him a Guy now-a-days, but he was a proper genelman, he was, none more so. And, Lor’, what a man he was for doing things; he

did everything! he used to sing songs, play the fiddle, make speeches, and keep things lively. Well, sir, Mr. Pratt of Homerton Grange, was a great man for pigs, but not much else in the way of intellect: now Mr. Kilderbee was at the top of the wine trade in these parts, and knew the length of every man he clapt eyes upon. Mr. Kilderbee was always going up to town on business, about wine and what not; and one day he returned to Carlton Cross after he'd been away for a many weeks. Mind, sir, I'm speaking now of what I can't remember, for I wasn't born when Mr. Kilderbee returned after a many weeks. I tell it to you as I have heard it from my father, who was landlord of the 'Cat and Gridiron,' before ever I was born. At the first market-supper after his return, Mr. Kilderbee got a-talking with Mr. Pratt of Homerton. Mr. Pratt was given to carry things rather high, on account of his pigs; and Mr. Kilderbee owed him a turn for something he'd said at Market Cross. So the long and short of it was, having got to high words in the presence of a full company, Mr. Pratt offered to fight Mr. Kilderbee; at which Mr. Kilderbee says, 'No, Pratt,' says he, 'I wont fight, for it's against my principles to fight; but to show you I'm not

afraid to bear pain, and *can* bear pain better than you, I'll tell what I'll do. We'll have a tub of biling water brought in this room and each of us shall put his right foot in it, sitting together side by side; and I'll bet you twenty guineas that, for all your brag about your courage, you'll take your foot out of the water before I do.' Now, Mr. Pratt of Homerton was a good one for a bet, and what's more, his blood was up. So he says 'done,' and Mr. Kilderbee says 'done;' and they jine hands. In another five minutes the tub of biling water is put down in the middle of the market-room, which was extra crowded by people who had heard what was up, and of course wished to see the end of the wager. The feeling ran against Mr. Pratt of Homerton, for he was apt to be rather high and mighty about his pigs. 'There goes my shoe,' says Mr. Kilderbee, putting it off; 'and now, Pratt, you put off that top-boot of yours, and then we'll try how hot it is through our stockings.' Mr. Kilderbee was in first by a several seconds, and took all quiet, though sure-lie he nipped his lips together a bit. As soon as Mr. Pratt had got his foot out of his top-boot, he dipped it into the water—but he didn't keep it there for long. He howled, and yelled, and halloed and screeched out for help.

‘Call a doctor!’ he screeched. And all the while there sate Mr. Kilderbee all calm and quiet, and enjoying himself. ‘Landlord,’ says he to my father with a smile, ‘get some more boiling water. What’s in this tub seems rather chilly.’ ‘Cornel Kilderbee,’ roars Mr. Pratt, wholly scared out of his senses and yet purple with rage, ‘you’re bewitched!—you’re an imp of hell!—it’s done by neckoromancy! you’re in league with the devil!’ ‘No, Pratt, no; not quite so bad as that,’ says Mr. Kilderbee, softly and mocking-like, still keeping his foot in the water—‘I am not in league with the devil, *but I’ve got a cork leg!*’ By gorms, sir, how all the market-room busted and roared with laughter, and how Mr. Pratt of Homerton swore and *rove*, just for all the world like a Bedlamite in a coal-cellar. And the more he swore and *rove*, the more the whole market-room busted and roared. And, sir, what Mr. Kilderbee said was just the truth. I told you as how he had been a goodish spell of time in London, just before this wager came off. Now, whilst he was in London he had met with an accident in being knocked down by a cart which broke his leg; and after that the surgeons had cut off his leg below the knee, they fixed him up with a cork leg and foot, made so wonderfully

neat, that, when he wore his stockings and buckled shoes, no one could see any difference atwixt the natteral and the compo limb. You see, he hadn't wrote home anything about his mishap, and so there wasn't a blessed soul in the market-room that could make out how it was that he bore the hot water without even a-flinching. But you may believe me, sir, the market-room busted and roared; and Mr. Pratt of Homerton didn't show again in the market-room until he had been set up once more by his pigs getting a sort more prizes."

Having heard and laughed over the foregoing story, should the stranger, with the courtesy becoming travellers in a new land, pass from the subject to the execution of the picture, and assure the rosy landlord of the "Cat and Gridiron" that he possesses a valuable work of art, he will contribute to his host's good-humour, and receive some such reply as this:—"A good picter and a wallable; there, sir, you speak truth. There's not such a picter as that in all the Border. It was painted by Mr. Gilbert; he who did my sign, which is the only 'Cat and Gridiron' all through the Border with a chop on the gridiron, to account for the cat caring to come nigh it. It was Mr. Gilbert who thought

of the chop one day when he was hungry and had been disappointed of some payments; and when he'd painted the chop from one I laid before him for to copy, he took up the real chop and grilled it and ate it. Says he to me, 'Landlord, it is not always that a painter can eat the model he has just painted,'—and there's no doubt it were a model chop. He was a s'prising ingenious man was Mr. Gilbert, and my belief is that if he could only have kept hisself from drink, he would have gone up high, but as it was he overdid it in liquor, and so we had to bury him at the cost of the parish. It was one day quite accidental like that I told Mr. Gilbert that story about Mr. Kilderbee. 'Blame me,' says he, 'if I don't make a picter of it, tub and all.' 'Nonsense,' says I, 'how are you to make the water bile in a picter?—it can't be done.' 'Can't it?' says he, 'can't it? leave that to a man who knows his trade. Come, landlord, here's an offer—if I paint the picter before the week is out, and make the water bile, will you give me two sovereigns down for it?' Well, sir, I was took by the thought, and I wished to do Jack Gilbert a turn, and what's more I saw the good which such a picter would be to the house, so I closes with him at once, and I do it liberal:

‘I will pay you forty shillings,’ I says, ‘and what’s more, you shall live at the ‘Cat and Gridiron,’ paying neither for vittles nor for drink, nor for bed while you’re at work; but mind, if the water don’t bile, I wont have the picter, and you’ll have to work out what you have taken in board, lodging, and entertainment.’ If he had broke down, of course I shouldn’t have been so hard with him as to press him for payment to the ‘Cat and Gridiron;’ but I said what I did just to put him on his mettle like. So he went to work. The poortright of Mr. Kilderbee he took from the picter that used to hang in Coote Hall, and now is in Dr. Stapleton’s dining-parlour. Mr. Pratt of Homerton, he knew all about it, for he had painted pigs for the old genelman. Well, sir, every dab of that picter was painted within five days; and when I seed how Mr. Gilbert had made the water bile, ‘Hang me,’ says I, ‘it scalds me to look at it.’ Ah! sir, a number of people have looked at that piece of furniture-draughting, and said they never expected to live to see water bile in a picter.”

CHAPTER XI.

Just a Little Drop of Gin-and-Water.

AMONGST many other racy stories told of this jocular and revolutionary wine-merchant there is one that will for many a day brighten the faces and rouse the boisterous laughter of Border farmers; and its power may as well be tried upon the readers of this narrative, since it serves to illustrate a quality of Cornelius Kilderbee's disposition, to which certain momentous incidents hereinafter to be narrated may be, in some measure, unquestionably referred.

Towards the close of his commercial life,—indeed, in the very month immediately preceding that in which Mr. Zebediah West was introduced to Carlton Cross as Cornelius Kilderbee's successor in the wine-trade,—Mr. Kilderbee made a long day's journey to certain townships, hamlets, outlying hostelries, and country mansions of the Border, seeking orders from old customers, and by wary questions endeavouring to ascertain how completely he should be able to transfer his

business connexion, as well as his business premises and cellar of curious and well-selected wines, to the said Zebediah West. It was a long round, and the merchant made it in the high-backed, yellow gig of the "Cat and Gridiron," drawn by the famous high-legged stepper of that excellent establishment, and driven by Soaky Watson, first ostler and superintendent-in-chief of the "Cat and Gridiron's" stables.

There is but small need to observe that whilst the fares whereat horses and gigs can be hired throughout the Border have been clearly and precisely fixed by the custom of the country, no definite mileage has ever been ordained as the proper remuneration for drivers. A general notion prevails at Carlton Cross that the driver of a hired gig is entitled to some threepence per mile from the traveller of average intelligence and liberality, and is justified in demanding much more than threepence a mile at the close of a job with respect to which no special contract was made for his services, but is unwise not to close with an offer of something less than threepence a mile when times are hard and he is dealing with a close-fisted customer who, familiar with the usages of the land, makes his bargain at the outset instead of the close of a long

day. In fact, the whole question of driver's remunerations is surrounded by doubts, difficulties, perplexing contingencies, and ill-defined rights, out of which the clever jehu can work considerable advantage to himself, and corresponding annoyance to his employer, unless the latter is wide-awake and provided against all attempts at extortion. Cornel Kilderbee was decidedly wide-awake and well able to take care of himself. A strange compound of closeness and generosity, he would give a hundred pounds to a friend in trouble, and grudge the paper on which he drew an order for the sum. Boasting that he "bought like a Jew and sold like a gentleman," he was a munificent giver, but the hardest of hard customers whenever he made up his mind to get money's worth for his money.

More than once Cornelius Kilderbee and Soaky Watson had fought a stout battle over half-a-crown, Watson holding out so bravely that he might have ampler means for gratifying a personal taste that had earned for him the suggestive sobriquet which had altogether put his Christian name out of the catalogue of social facts, whereas the merchant was nerved by a constitutional disinclination to be done by any man,—more especially by a man who did not know how to keep a

guinea when his fingers had closed upon it. As a scrupulously just and fair man, Cornelius Kilderbee never attempted to set aside the central idea on which Watson relied for success, the principle that threepence a mile was somewhere about the sum which a driver ought to receive. Indeed, the merchant neither showed a wish at any time to deduct the smallest fraction of a penny from the mileage, nor ever exhibited reluctance in binding himself to do all that was liberal in regard to mid-day refreshment; but he firmly resisted the cunning with which Soaky Watson systematically over-estimated the number of miles to be travelled. The contests invariably ended with an appearance of defeat on the part of the ostler, and a conviction in the merchant's breast that notwithstanding all his calculations and hardness he had been actually worsted. "You're very hard on me, Master Kilderbee, very hard," time after time said the ostler, one of those bibulous whips of the old time in whom sobriety would have been downright wickedness while they were on duty, as they were not safe drivers under conditions of peril—say, a dark night, a narrow road with an open ditch on either side, and a hard-mouthed horse given to running away—unless they were half-seas over; "but

when a poor man deals with a rich one, he knows what to expect. Perhaps the poor man's turn will come one day, in this world or the next. But never mind; I must live as I best can till that time comes. So I take your terms, and I'll make my dinner off their hardness." To which form of submission Cornelius Kilderbee would reply with a dry chuckle, "There, Soaky, I know you've cheated me. There's no such grumbler as a contented rascal."

On the occasion of Mr. Kilderbee's last business journey in the Border, the old fight was repeated without the omission of a single point. The case was whether the latter would be entitled to seven-and-sixpence or ten-and-sixpence; and considering that he knew the former sum was a trifle in excess of what would be due to him from the threepenny mileage, enough praise cannot be accorded to the determination and total disregard of truth with which Soaky fought for what he knew he shouldn't get. "Now look ye, Watson," said Mr. Kilderbee, interrupting him with an appearance of concession, "I wont give you a penny more; but if you like to pay for your own dinner at Stradbroke 'Dragon,' when we get back here at night I'll give you as much gin-and-water as you can drink."

Not twice did Mr. Watson think before he accepted this offer. Proudly conscious of his powers to stow away a bottle and a half of the best gin (*i.e.*, Kilderbee's "peculiar") at a single sitting, as long as fair play and time were given him, he closed at once with the alluring terms; and all through the day's drive he laid plans for the coming bliss, settling in his own mind how the under ostler and helps of the "Cat and Gridiron" should be induced to put up the stables for the night without his co-operation; how the landlord of the "Cat and Gridiron," a man with liberal notions respecting indulgence in liquor, should be definitely asked for a permission that would ensure a large consumption of gin at Mr. Kilderbee's expense; how having obtained his master's permission to make the best of a good bargain, he, Soaky Watson, would steadily go in for fourpennyworth after fourpennyworth of Kilderbee's "peculiar," ringing the changes on hot with and hot without, varied by cold with and cold without, until he should attain to that point of intoxication at which, if a man is happy, he scarcely knows it, if he is miserable it doesn't much matter. All through that long drive in the cold air of a raw November day Soaky Watson's imagination drew pleasant

pictures of the sanded floor of his master's public kitchen—of the blazing fire of that kitchen, in which a chosen horse-shoe of compotators nightly assembled ; of the distinguished and essentially jocular position which he should soon occupy in that chosen horse-shoe as an unlimited consumer of ardent spirits at Mr. Kilderbee's expense ; of the occasional sips which he would give his special pals ; of the copious draughts that he would take himself. The prospect offered him a chance of enduring fame as well as transient enjoyment. In his heart Soaky Watson wished to make such a use of his opportunities as should leave it an unquestionable fact, that he could "carry" more gin-and-water than any other man in Carlton Cross, and also render it notorious that, notwithstanding his miraculous cleverness, Mr. Kilderbee had met his match and master in the head-ostler of the "Cat and Gridiron."

At length the journey and daylight came to a close.

"There, that'll do," observed Cornel Kilderbee, cramped and cold — as elderly gentlemen are apt to be after a long drive in an open gig through a chilling atmosphere. "Stop here at the front door of the 'Cat and Gridiron ;' and when I've spoken to your master about

the gin-and-water, you can drive me to my own door."

"You recollect, sir," observed the man, wishing to intimate that his master was not to be empowered to limit the supply of tippie; "I was to have as much gin-and-water as I could drink."

"No doubt, Soaky, no doubt. I don't forget that," replied Mr. Kilderbee, cautiously descending from the gig at the door of the tavern, and walking stiffly towards the private bar.

In less than two minutes after entering the "Cat and Gridiron," Mr. Kilderbee reappeared in the street holding in his hand a single glass of the spirit that was known throughout the Border as his own "peculiar." Behind him came the second helper of the stables, bearing a monstrous pailful of cold water. At a glance Soaky recognised his own stable-pail, and smelt mischief.

"Here you are, Soaky," exclaimed Cornelius Kilderbee, in his most hospitable fashion. "I have brought all the materials, and you shan't have any reason to complain that I deceived you as to quantity. Here is a fourpennyworth of my own 'peculiar'" — eyeing the wine-glass with affectionate admiration — "the best gin in all

England ; and here's a pail of pump-water, the very best pump-water in all Carlton Cross. There"—deliberately suiting his action to the words—"now I have mixed 'em for you ; the sugar and lemon-peel are ordered, and they'll be brought out in a minute. Of course I don't limit you to this little drop of liquor ; and if you'll let me know when you have done it I shall be most happy to mix you another pail of the same quality."

Let us add that, whenever a denizen of the Border tells this story, he always stays his laughter at the end of it to add, "But mind ye, don't misunderstand the man. Cornel Kilderbee was the last fellow in the world to wrong a poor man. He had a liberal hand, and did a great deal of good in his day."

CHAPTER XII.

Mrs. Stapleton is not dissatisfied with her Son, but James is by no means pleased with himself.

THE days that intervened between the domestic scene recorded in our ninth chapter and the quarter-day on which James Stapleton had decided to make his matrimonial wishes known to Cornelius Kilderbee, seemed a very brief period to Mrs. Stapleton, who, having consented to her son's plan, found an abundance of not uncongenial occupation in regarding the new prospect from the most favourable points of view, in discovering its various recommendations, and in settling in her own mind the best method of placing the matter before the borough. No little light is thrown on her character when we say that the imperious lady found but slight difficulty in reconciling herself to a proposal that upset a scheme on which she had for several years fixed her heart. Some readers may learn with surprise that she adapted herself with much facility to the new

circumstances ; but the fact will occasion no astonishment to those accurate observers of human nature who are aware that people of domineering tempers often surpass less overbearing mortals in submitting, with good grace and inward contentment, to opposition that is beyond their powers of mastery. Yielding and timid women usually suffer far more than their self-willed and arrogant sisters from sudden and violent disarrangements of their intentions. The former may not have the courage to rebel, but their discontent is none the less real because they do not care to rise in arms against the causes of their disquiet. The same energy that makes the latter ambitious of command, endows them with spirit to assert themselves on new ground. Moreover, to dictatorial persons, whose wishes are rarely crossed, the necessity for submission is sometimes a source of pleasurable as well as novel excitement.

These truths are illustrated by Mrs. Stapleton's case.

Having accepted the new plan, she now liked it better than the old. Hitherto she had held no familiar intercourse with Bessie Clayton ; for, in the absence of special considerations enjoining an exceptional course of action, it of course was not to be expected that the daughter of Arch-

deacon Howlett would condescend to take much notice of the young lady who, besides being a dissenter's niece, was a member of a radical's household. It was true that this niece of a Nonconformist was herself a member of the Established Church; it was also true that her uncle had been the benefactor of Lemuel Stapleton's widow and children; but Mrs. Stapleton conceived herself to accord due recognition to these facts by bowing to the young lady whenever she encountered her in the streets of the borough, and by exchanging two or three formal calls with her during the course of every twelve months. The doctor's widow had admitted Bessie to the rank of her private acquaintance, in a certain cold and lofty fashion. In society she had been even heard to say that Miss Clayton was an excellent young person, and altogether superior to her uncle's social connexions.

But now that her son meant to make this excellent young person his wife, Mrs. Stapleton formed a far higher estimate of her qualifications. That Miss Clayton possessed good looks, which fell little short of singular beauty, no one could deny; that her style indicated her own rather than her uncle's religious profession was manifest at a glance; that she was no less amiable in temper

than attractive in person every sane person must admit ; that her taste in dress was almost faultless every critical eye recognised ; that her voice was musical and well-trained in harmonious exercise no one who had ever heard her clear notes in the parish church could question ; that her education had been properly cared for was attested by the bills which Mr. Kilderbee had paid for her tuition at the first boarding-school for young ladies in the three counties. Thus the mother looked at the brighter aspects of the affair.

But the recommendation which recurred to Mrs. Stapleton's mind more frequently than any other, was the fortune which the young lady or her husband would doubtless acquire at her uncle's death. That she would prove a dutiful and manageable daughter-in-law, Mrs. Stapleton had no doubt. Upon the whole, therefore, the mother was well pleased with her son's choice ; and soon her mind was busy with a hundred visions of the pleasant life that Mrs. Stapleton and Mrs. James Stapleton would lead together. It never for one moment occurred to the lady that Bessie Clayton might not care to accept her son ; for as she had herself declared to James, such presumption on the part of Miss Clayton was clearly impossible. It is to be feared that,

amidst her many thoughts concerning her son's future, Archdeacon Howlett's daughter gave but slight heed to the probable conduct and certain suffering of poor Emma Harrison. Other persons, besides elderly ladies accustomed to the enjoyment of their own way, are prone to be selfish with respect to matters that closely concern their domestic comfort.

Whilst time passed thus pleasantly to his mother, James Stapleton was in a state of intense and unintermitting agitation, and found the hours hang heavily on hand. For years he had been in love with Bessie Clayton, without experiencing similar excitement. So long as he had felt himself required by prudence to keep his hope a secret to his own breast, and had laboured under circumstances that caused him to regard his marriage altogether as the affair of an indefinite future, the ardour of his longing had never made him impatient of the barriers that rendered its instant fulfilment impossible. But now that he had admitted two persons to his confidence—now that he saw himself in a position to marry—now that the time which remained for consumption, ere he should make his petition to Bessie Clayton, was an affair of days—ay, of hours—it seemed that the end of his sentimental anxiety

was more distant than ever. Having opened the flood-gates of self-restraint, he found himself carried onward by the full, strong stream of a mighty passion ; and it was with no common difficulty that he adhered to the programme which he had sketched for himself.

Indeed, had it not been for Herrick Kingsford's prudent counsels, there is reason for believing that the surgeon's resolution would not have held out, and that he would have learnt his fate from Bessie's lips some days sooner than he eventually ascertained it. But Herrick, to whose sympathizing ear James had confided the fact of his mother's consent, together with many other particulars which he might as well have kept to himself, was very urgent that the programme should be carried out to the letter, and that the surgeon, after all his patience, should not injure his chances of success by premature action. He reminded James that just as the turkey-charmer, by one false movement, may undo the work of laborious hours, and lose at the last moment the bird which is on the point of surrendering itself to his lures, so the lover, by a single act of indiscretion, may sacrifice all the results of judicious wooing, and scare from his toils the girl whom he has almost caught. So

also, with his customary air of protective consideration, the lawyer reminded James that by carrying out his determination to wait until he had repaid the last shilling of his debt to Mr. Kilderbee, he would be persevering in a course that would strongly commend itself to the merchant's sense of the fitness of things.

James continued to wait.

But during those days, wherever his business took him about the Border, Bessie's face was always before his eyes; and the more that he endeavoured to persuade himself that he had good reasons for hoping the best, the more convinced did he become that he had still better grounds for fearing the worst. Again and again during that period of trial the honest fellow consulted his looking-glass, and angrily addressed the reflection that it presented to him in such words as these—"I see you, sir! no doubt about it! I see your big, heavy, angular jaws, your huge, silly lips; I see your hulking, shambling body. You're a nice object. By Jove, sir, you are a blot on creation. You are a dull, sensual beast, I tell you, and yet you have the infernal presumption to hope that the loveliest girl in the three counties—ay, the loveliest girl in all England—will bring herself to kiss

your brutal, ogre-like face. Pshaw! I should very much enjoy thrashing you with a sound oak stick. Do you hear me, sir!—you're a sensual beast!"

Time flies fastest with the happy; but even to the veriest wretches of creation, to men under sentence of death, he never stands quite still.

CHAPTER XIII.

Uncle Kilderbee Consents.

AT length the hour came when James Stapleton found himself sitting *tête-à-tête* with Cornelius Kilderbee in that cosy parlour of Green Villa which the retired merchant was pleased to call his "keeping-room." It was evening, and as the outer air was chilly, Mr. Kilderbee, like a prudent man, had drawn the damask curtains over the shuttered windows of his keeping-room, and had brightened its sombre walls with a blazing fire. An inkstand and ledger upon the table, and a pen in the merchant's right hand, indicated that he and the surgeon had been speaking about some question of accounts, when the latter observed—"There, sir!—now I have paid just that much of my debt which an ungrateful man could have paid, the rest must remain ; and if you can spare me a few minutes, Mr. Kilderbee, I should now like to speak to you about another and very different matter."

"Yah ! yah !—not so fast," replied the elder,

busyng himself over an account in the green-bound ledger, and forbearing to raise his eyes to the man whom he addressed; "let me finish this matter, and then I'll listen to you. One thing at a time is quite enough if you do it well; two things are less than enough if you do them badly. You're a clever fellow, but you can't open a vein and draw a tooth at the same time."

In another minute Cornelius Kilderbee—a tall, slight man, noticeable for the keenness of his countenance and the stiffness of his knee-joints—rose with a courageous assumption of bodily briskness, and moving with an agility that, considering his cork leg, and chronic gout, and advanced years, was really wonderful, replaced his account-book in an escritoire that stood in the furthest corner of the room. That done, he resumed his arm-chair, and leaning forwards, with a hand on either thigh, ejaculated, in a sharply interrogative tone, the monosyllable—

"Well?"

"You see, sir," responded James Stapleton, somewhat put out of countenance by his companion's curtness, "I am now in a position to marry."

Pause of embarrassment.

"I see it—well?" put in the elder.

“There is no doubt about it, Mr. Kilderbee, that I can now afford to keep a wife and family.”

“Who on earth said you couldn’t? Well?”

“As I was saying, Mr. Kilderbee, I am now a free man?”

“Are you?”

James, suddenly blushing as he explained himself, “I mean free as to debt.”

“No doubt—free as to debt. Well?”

“And now, sir, I mean to marry.”

“Of course, you do. Now that you’re out of debt you wish to burden yourself with a wife and a gang of brats. Having got out of one trouble, you wish to get into another. That’s the way of the world with mere boys; but you are not a mere boy, and ought to know better. But since you mean to marry, of course you will marry, and nothing that I can say will stop you. It’s no use trying to save a man who is thoroughly set on suicide. You may pull him out of one pond, but he’ll soon drown himself in another. But pray go on, James Stapleton; for yours is an uncommon pretty story, though it’s not altogether new. So you mean to marry? Well?”

“I want your approval of my choice.”

“Indeed! That’ll make a vast difference!

My disapproval will put an end to your love, eh?"

"No; but it would certainly put off the fulfilment of my hopes."

"You don't say so? Perhaps you want me to make love for you? Now surely, James Stapleton, you can do that sort of thing for yourself better than an old man with asthmatic lungs, gouty blood, and a cork leg can do it for you."

"You have great influence with the lady, and if you'd exercise it in my behalf I should be still more deeply obliged to you. She wont marry me unless you give her leave."

Mr. Kilderbee, with increased sharpness, "Oh, you know that, do you?"

"Certain of it."

At this point the veteran leaned back in his chair, with a mischievous twinkle in his keen eyes and mirth beaming in every feature of his thin, long, wine-encrimsoned face; and as he so sat,—the whiteness of his close-cropped hair contrasting with the inflammatory hue of his prominent nose, and the pigtail that fell upon his high-collared blue coat indicating the almost obsolete generation to which he belonged,—no spectator of the scene would have hesitated to admit that Mr. Kilderbee was a well-looking old gentleman, and

a decidedly agreeable as well as characteristic specimen of the pigtail and frilled-shirt period.

“ In point of fact, Mr. Kilderbee,” continued James Stapleton, “ I want to speak to you about Miss Clayton.”

“ Young man,” interrupted the elder in a tone of warning, “ I gave you my money once upon a time, and you have insisted on returning every penny of it ; but if I give you my niece, I am sorely afraid you’ll never let me have her again.”

“ You are right there.”

“ But since,” continued Mr. Kilderbee, his features relaxing into an expression of benevolence, “ you two have made it up between you, and understand each other, and all that sort of thing——”

“ But, sir, it has not come to ‘ all that sort of thing.’ I have not ventured to speak to Miss Clayton before asking your permission.”

A sudden scarlet flush made the old man’s usually white forehead of one colour with his invariably ensanguined face, as, careless of gouty monitions, he struck his right hand on the table and exclaimed in a high key, and with an affectation of disdain, “ Then, perish me” (the expression actually used was something much more

profane), "what a fool you have been, to hang about shilly-shallying instead of going in and fixing her! Perish me, if you don't deserve to lose her for your miserable want of confidence in yourself, and for your misdirected and altogether superfluous respect to an old gray-headed curmudgeon like myself! Why, man, you've made a downright fool of me. Here have I been for the last year or two bringing you together, and leaving you together, and giving you all sorts of opportunities, and, perish me, you've not even got over the preliminaries. Why, James Stapleton, a tortoise would have done more under the circumstances."

"Then you wish for it?" inquired James with equal surprise and gratification.

"Wish for it! Oh, dear me; you'll kill me with your abominable stupidity. Why—" (and here Mr. Kilderbee affixed to an ejaculatory mention of his eyes the word which we will continue to misreport as 'perish')—"it was I who brought you together; it was I who made up the match, as anxiously and cleverly and successfully as any old woman bent on fixing a favourite daughter well in life could have played the same sort of game; and now that you are going to marry, and become one bone and all the rest of it, perish

me, if you are not after settling matters so that I shall get none of the credit of having brought it about."


Towards the close of this piece of raillery, the old man's voice rose to a high key that scarcely accorded with the humorous lightness of the part which he was endeavouring to play; and his utterance was affected by a spasmodic action of the throat that betrayed the strength of emotions which he vainly tried to conceal beneath an air of levity.

"My dear Mr. Kilderbee, my true and dear friend," James Stapleton's deep and melodious voice answered with impressive slowness and corresponding depth of intonation, "I am accustomed to kindness from you; till this hour from my boyhood your goodness has encompassed and supported me; and yet, sir, used as I am to your beneficent consideration, this exhibition of your care for me is almost too much for me to bear without behaving as men are bound by their pride not to behave."

Something more the surgeon would have said had not Cornelius Kilderbee by a sudden elevation of his right hand and an abrupt utterance intimated that he had need of a minute's silence for the recovery of his self-command.

CHAPTER XIV.

Good Bail.

FTER a pause, during which a paleness arising from new emotion rather than decrease of excitement modified the brilliance of his complexion, the veteran laid his right fore-arm upon the table, and turning his eyes full upon his companion observed, "Don't thank me, boy. If you are grateful to me for having done you any good, render thanks to your father's memory. For though I have long since loved you for your own sake, I should have done just the same to you for his sake, even if you hadn't been a boy made to my own heart. He was my old true friend when the strong ones of the Border wished to crush me. Ay, he was a noble man. Mayhap you never heard of a great service that he rendered me?"

"Not of any special matter,—that is to say, not as to particulars."

"It is only from hearsay that you can have learnt what I'll now tell you, for it's not im-

portant enough to be any matter of history ; and it occurred in '94, before you were born. In that year you may have heard, ay, *must* have heard, the great people of the Border decided to get up a criminal prosecution against me, and by my ruin warn all turbulent country tradesmen that they had better bear themselves respectfully to their superiors, and abstain from criticizing the Government of the country. That was the time when it was treason to whisper what king's ministers now-a-days are applauded for uttering aloud ; when it was diabolical to hold views that now-a-days command admiration when they come from the lips of a bishop charging his clergy, or are openly advocated in the House of Lords by Tory peers. Why, half of what I was scouted for demanding from the legislature when I was a young man is at this very moment the law of the land ; and the other half will be conceded before I have been ten years in my coffin. Things were hottish all over the country in those days ; and here in Carlton Cross, hang me, if they weren't at boiling point. The borough was what old Archdeacon Howlett, your grandfather, used to call a hot-bed of sedition ; and yet the Church party carried themselves so high, that no Churchman ever thought of entering a dissenter's

shop, no Nonconformist could have shown himself at a 'parish dinner' without causing a tumult."

"A change has taken place since then," observed James, who had, of course, again and again heard these and similar reminiscences from the old politician's lips.

"A change, I believe you. I have lived to be mayor of the borough, in which it was once thought by the higher folk that, on account of my religious principles, I was scarce fit to vote as a burgess. But it was hottish in '94, and long afterwards. Well, the magistrates about here had satisfied themselves that I was a most pernicious and pestilent fellow, and had conceived a wish to make an example of me. It was known that I was the local secretary of the 'Corresponding Society;' and it was clear to people who knew the Border that I was drawing a good deal of political influence into my hands. Stories of the most wonderful kind floated about the three counties concerning me. They would have it that I was bent on plundering the rich, destroying the Church, poisoning the nobility, and killing the king. There was no imaginable atrocity of which I was not capable. Your grandfather, old Archdeacon Howlett, denounced me from the pulpit as a disseminator of sedition.

At last there was a charge trumped up against me. A poor tramp, to whom I gave a few shillings out of charity, together with an introduction to James Barker, the bookseller and printer, in order that he might get a new set of his old ballads printed, gave them a handle against me. The poor fellow got his living by selling ballads about the Border; and when he had pretty nigh exhausted his stock of broadsides, he paid one of our country printers to strike him off a fresh supply. Where he got the ballads from originally, Heaven knows. When I came to look at them, to my surprise I found amongst them several old Jacobite songs, that certainly did not speak in a very handsome way of 'King George.' Of course, my enemies read them as pointing at George the Third, and maintained that I had set the old ballad-seller to spread them about the Border, in the hope of stimulating the discontent and disloyalty of the poorer classes."

"Yes, and my father—what had my father to do in this matter?"

"I am coming to that. Ridiculous as the basis of the accusation was, it threatened to be serious. Many an honest fellow in those days was thrown into prison, ay, and lost his life for a smaller indiscretion. I was arrested and carried

before the county—not the borough—magistrates for examination. I told my story—that the old tramp had sold the same ballads about here for the last twenty years; that the ballads had no reference whatever to the reigning king; that when I gave the poor man a present of money and an introduction to James Barker, I knew nothing whatever of the contents of his broadsides; that under these circumstances it was simply absurd to regard my action as seditious. ‘Absurd!’ exclaimed the chairman of the bench, old Sir Mortimer Mollineux, catching up my word—‘you apply that term to his Majesty’s Justices of the Peace.’ ‘No, your Honour,’ I replied, ‘but to a course which they will decline to adopt.’ ‘Hold your tongue, man!’ the old gentleman cried out. ‘You’re a prating fellow; you are never seen at your parish church; I know the kind of fellow you are,—and now I and my brethren of the Bench have caught you tripping, we’ll lay you by the heels, and teach you modesty in the county gaol!’

“The case was remanded; and, of course, I asked to be set at liberty on bail. After consulting with the other magistrates Sir Mortimer said, ‘Yes, you may be out on bail till Friday; but the bail must be satisfactory.’ Immediately,

eight substantial tradesmen and two Nonconformist ministers offered themselves as my bail ; but (you'll hardly believe it), the Bench indignantly rejected them all, *because* they were dissenters. 'Then, gentlemen,' I said, bowing politely to the Bench, 'you must keep me in confinement : for those who know me well enough to trust me, as an honest man, are all of them dissenters.'

"Go on, sir," interposed James Stapleton, who had for the moment forgotten his love affairs.

"Now these words had scarce escaped my lips," continued Cornelius Kilderbee, "when your father stept forwards and said, 'You're wrong there, Mr. Kilderbee. I am a Churchman, and as blue at heart as any man in the borough. I hate your political principles, but I respect you as an honest man ; and if the Bench will accept me, I'll be your bail.' He had only come into the justices' room just in time to hear my last words ; and seeing what the difficulty was—that no Churchman would say a word for me—he came instantly to my help. 'What!' roared Sir Mortimer, beside himself with amazement : 'you offer yourself bail for a sedition-monger, Mr. Stapleton? What do you mean,

sir? Are you mad? Don't you remember that you are my doctor, eh?' 'Yes, Sir Mortimer,' answered your father, in his politest way, 'I am your doctor, and Mr. Kilderbee's neighbour; and though I am not given to quoting Scripture, I could tell you a text which encourages me to do him a neighbour's part.' Well, there was an end of that matter. Your father was well known and well respected; the magistrates accepted him as a surety for my appearance; and after putting their heads together they agreed to regard a member of my own congregation as a good and sufficient man to be joined as bail with your father.'

After a pause, Cornelius Kilderbee continued: "Before Friday came, the magistrates had taken a calmer and more judicious view of the whole question; and old Lawyer Kingsford, your friend Herrick's grandfather, received an intimation from Sir Mortimer that the proceedings against me would be dropt. The Kingsfords were, of course, true blue; and the old lawyer, as clerk of the magistrates, would have been required to instruct counsel and gather evidence for my prosecution had the authorities persevered in carrying out their intention to make an example of me. The Kingsfords had ere then conceived a

dislike for that turbulent tradesman, Cornelius Kilderbee; and they were not softened towards me by my good fortune in slipping out of the net which they had weaved for my destruction. That matter wasn't the beginning—and Heaven knows, too, it wasn't the end—of the quarrel between us. A-ah!—” As the speaker uttered this cry, the memory of his old parochial feud with the up-looking Kingsfords—men hateful to him as private enemies no less than as political adversaries—flushed his forehead with crimson. “A-ah! I've been a thorn in the flesh of the Kingsfords; and though their tongues are smooth enough to me now, and though we never meet in the High-street without passing the good-day between us, I should enjoy knocking another spoke or two out of their carriage wheels before I start on the quick passage to kingdom-come. They are a false, tyrannical, smooth-tongued lot. In the whole lot of them there never was man or woman without a heart full to bursting with insolence and malignity; and their sickening arrogance is all the more offensive because it is coated over with a plausible affectation of kindness that sometimes makes them popular amongst the very persons whom they treat most contemptuously. They

are an insufferable set of bumptious sneaks—playing the bully one day and the toady the next. But mind you, Jem, my boy, I'll give them another turn before I close accounts with them."

It was characteristic of the speaker that for the moment the recollection of his long-enduring feud with the Kingsfords had put out of sight those memories of his old friendship for Lemuel Stapleton which, a minute earlier, had stirred his heart, and given his voice a tone of deep and solemn emotion.

Instead of finding relief in speech his irritation against the odious Kingsfords grew with utterance until it boiled up in a fury of malevolence and disdain. His eyes burning more and more fiercely as he continued to give greater licence to his tongue, and the customary crimson of his mobile features deepening into angry purple as he recalled the chief causes of his vehement animosity against the whole kindred of the Tory banker, he continued in a tone that was all the more expressive of the force and depth of his hatred because it was by no means boisterous.

"The whole Border does not contain a more impudent, stuck-up hypocrite than old Kingsford

of Coote Hall. He is as greedy and insolent at heart as he is smooth and sweet in speech. He does not dare to treat me with much of his palaver, for he knows well enough that it wouldn't impose on me. As for his brother Ambrose, though the man is dead, I don't withhold myself from saying that within the lines of the law—always, mind ye, within those legal lines which consummate rascality knows best and most about—the fellow was an arrant knave—a thorough knave—an unutterably dirty knave. But they have prospered; and your friend Herrick is to be the great man, the grand gentleman of the family. He is to be Lawyer Kingsford of Carlton Cross, and Banker Kingsford of Carlton Cross, and Squire Kingsford of Coote Hall, years after his uncle Hercules shall have reaped the reward of his sins. That youngster is as sleek and perky and up-looking as any and all of his kin; and he is just as truthless and cowardly.”

“Come, come, sir,” urged James Stapleton, whose loyal nature would not allow him to sit quietly whilst such harsh language was directed at his old schoolmate and peculiar friend. Even though he should offend his benefactor, and injure himself in the estimation of Bessie Clayton's

uncle, the surgeon, who in his heart regarded Mr. Kilderbee's antagonism to the Kingsfords as extravagant and ludicrous, though not unaccountable, decided to put a curb on his companion's wrath as soon as it bore unjustly on Ambrose Kingsford's son.

"Herrick is a good enough fellow," he urged. "You know more about his father and uncle than I as a youngster can know; but circumstances have rendered me more familiar with Herrick than I am with my own brothers, and I say this stoutly, there isn't a better fellow in the three counties than Herrick. There, sir,—Herrick is as honest and true a man as can be found in the whole Border."

"I am sure I hope you'll always think so," rejoined Cornelius Kilderbee, with a dry, suspicious rattle in his voice, as the storm of his fury subsided as suddenly as it had risen.

"But, sir," continued James, detecting the desired change, and prudently turning the old man's thoughts from the immediate source of annoyance, "you were speaking of my father?"

"Yes, boy, yes, so I was. Let me see," responded the veteran, recovering himself and his subject at the same time, "it was about that foolish business of the tramp's ballads. Well,

there the matter rested. But I should have been put to further trouble—and the Lord only knows to how much more disgrace—if your father had not driven about the country from magistrate to magistrate, expostulating with them, pledging his word that I was a loyal though perhaps foolish fellow, and making them see that my treasonable conduct in the matter of the ballads was mere moonshine: and that however much it might answer Lawyer Kingsford's purpose to trump up a suit against me on such ridiculous grounds, public opinion would secure my acquittal at the assizes. Now, boy, that was very noble of your father."

"Well, sir, I like to hear of it," answered James Stapleton, the brightness of his honest eyes according with the mellow richness of his voice. "It is pleasant to think of you and my father as friends when you were young men; very pleasant to know that your friend did not fail you in the hour of need."

"You mayn't look at the affair so," interposed the old man, quickly. "If I had been your father's friend, the matter would have been less to his credit, for friends always stick to each other. At that time we were not even acquaintances. He was blue, as your people have always

been ; I was yellow. He was a Churchman ; I a dissenter. He was a gentleman, the most prosperous doctor in this part of the Border ; I a struggling tradesman, whom the threatened prosecution would have ruined and driven from the borough. Now look at his conduct from another point of view. The magistrates of this immediate neighbourhood were, every man of them, his patients, and in coming to my defence he ran great risk of losing some of his best employers, and doing himself a permanent injury. A man gives no small sign of moral courage, when in the heat of party warfare he ventures to protect a political adversary, and protest against the indiscretion of his political friends. But your father was a just man, and preferred justice to his private interest ! He was a generous man, and could appreciate honesty in an opponent ! He was a brave man, and did for me what half your battle-field heroes would not have dared to do ! His conduct—” Cornelius Kilderbee paused, whilst he mentally looked about him for words adequate to express the thought that filled him, and then lowering his voice, he added—“ was as bright and noble as my gratitude is profound !”

“ Boy,” continued the old man, “ when your father died I came to your side with a helping

hand. I wished to do much more for you than I did, but I kept my wishes to myself, for I knew that your own pride and Mrs. Stapleton's sense of dignity would not let you accept anything at my hands if I pressed too much upon you. But what I said then I say still, 'While I am in the world, and can command a thousand guineas, no child of Lemuel Stapleton's shall ever come to misfortune through want of such a sum.' It is no new thought to me, this wish of yours to marry Bessie. I have been in no hurry to put her into your hands, for an old man's home has not so many sources of pleasure that he can surrender such a housekeeper as Bessie without a struggle. Perhaps I should have done better to have hurried on matters between you a little faster; but old men are selfish, and though this world's future is necessarily short to me, there's plenty of time before you for happiness.

* * * She's a sweet, gentle, clever creature; no note is wrong in the music of her life; she is pious to God, dutiful to me, and gracious to everybody. For your sake, Jem, I am glad that she has been brought up in the Church; and for both your sakes I thank God for having so far prospered me in life that I shall be able to give you sooner or later something better or but

little worse than thirty thousand pounds. She'll bring you a tidy fortune in gold and silver, Jem, but she'll bring you what's worth more to a man of your kind than any amount of money—she'll bring you the devotion of a fine and noble nature."

"Is she at home, sir?" James asked, with an air of awkward though not dishonest shame.

"You can't see her this evening, Jem," replied Cornelius Kilderbee, quickly catching the surgeon's hint, and answering it with a roguish twinkle as well as with words. "She has gone out to spend an hour or two with neighbour Rathbone's wife and daughters, and she wont be back much before bed-time. No, no, you must see her to-morrow, in the afternoon. Look ye, Jem, I'll arrange a time for you. I dine at two o'clock, and between three and five in the afternoon, while I am having my after-dinner snooze, Bessie in the ordinary way amuses herself in the garden. To-morrow afternoon, if it's fine, I shouldn't wonder if you found her between three and five, say four o'clock, near the fish-pond, working at a water-colour picture, which'll lick anything in the way of art that your cousin Emma Harrison ever painted. Now, if you can make her say 'yes' to you before she returns to the


house, why, hang me, if I don't give you leave to kiss her on the spot, so long as you consent to ask my pardon afterwards."

Thus the matter was left for that evening.

And so thoroughly was James Stapleton satisfied with the aspect of affairs, that on his way home from Green Villa he could not refrain from looking in upon Herrick Kingsford, and giving that familiar friend the latest intelligence respecting a matter in which he unquestionably took a very lively interest.

CHAPTER XV.

Simple and yet Gentle.

N the following day James Stapleton arrayed himself with unusual care in his most effective walking-attire; and after passing judgment on his appearance before his customary toilet-glass with something less than his usual despondency, he was about to leave his house at 3.50 P.M., when his mother encountered him in the hall with a smile of encouragement, and in her hand a flower for his button-hole. "Don't let her keep you to tea, James. No doubt she'll press you to stop; but there will be no need for you to accept the invitation. I shall be waiting for your return, and wanting to hear all about it."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Stapleton put the rose and sprig of green in her boy's coat, and raised her face to receive the kiss with which he acknowledged her final touch to his personal adornment. "My nervousness has left me, mother," he observed, in a low, confiding tone, that be-

trayed the fear which his words disclaimed. "I feel almost certain of success." For a moment her eyes brightened with maternal sympathy and solicitude; but with an effort Archdeacon Howlett's daughter restrained the rising tears, and giving him a merry pat on his broad right arm, and a merrier smile, rejoined, "Small reason have you for fear, my son; for myself, I have not yet left off wondering at the girl's rare good fortune. I hope it wont turn her head."

With this maternal encouragement, James Stapleton quitted his house, and turning out of High-street, took the way towards Green Villa. It was but a five minutes' walk; but in those five minutes of intense excitement familiar objects so bit themselves into his consciousness that they seemed to have a new significance, and were long afterwards associated in his mind with that day's errand and its result. The sky was bright and cloudless, the air warm as July weather; and as he crossed the Green he heard, with unaccustomed distinctness, the notes of the boisterous birds piping in the elms. Herrick Kingsford traversed his path at a distance of some twenty feet; and as they exchanged significant glances, James recalled that morning, at the close of his student days, when he received a similar look of en-

couragement from his friend, as they shook hands at the door of the College in Lincoln's-inn-fields the minute before he faced his professional examiners. He remembered vividly the agitation with which he presented himself on that occasion before his tutors in the College library, and it appeared to him ominous of success that the same trusted comrade should thus bid him be of good cheer at a moment of even keener anxiety.

Running from north to south, a dusty road divides the Green into two pleasant lawns; and as he put his clumsy feet on the white powder of the broad way, he saw nigh the church-corner his favourite sister driving her white pony, and signalling to him to stop; but instead of obeying her gesture, he waved his hand and hurried onwards to his fate. "She'll take tea with my mother," he said to himself, as he opened the gate of Green Villa; "and, *if it's all right*, it will be pleasant to tell her the name of her future sister."

Another second, and he was within the boundary of Cornelius Kilderbee's garden, hastening towards the fish-pond under the attentive observation of the worthy merchant, who felt small need for his customary nap, and took no shame to himself for playing the spy from his parlour-window on the movements of the

young people whom he had exerted himself to bring together. Indeed, the kindly old man had resolved to act as gooseberry-picker to the lovers ; to keep watch over them whilst they had their interesting interview ; to prowl about his grounds at a respectful distance from the ornamental water, and take good care that no unexpected guest should intrude on their privacy at a crisis when it was most necessary that they should be left to themselves. During the previous evening, Mr. Kilderbee had likened himself to a match-making mother ; and certainly no woman of the world, anxious to bring about a match between Bessie and James, could have conducted that afternoon's arrangements with greater prudence, or given them a better chance of success.

Ten more seconds, and James Stapleton paused at a point where he saw Bessie under circumstances that did not lessen her habitual comeliness. Behind her lay a lawn of finest turf, bright with verbenas and geraniums, asters and petunias, and deftly planted with well-grown timber, through which a corner of her uncle's modest mansion was visible. On her left, a summer-house roofed with masses of Virginian creeper, the burning scarlet of its gorgeous leaves putting out of sight the faint autumn tint that had otherwise been

apparent on the verdure of the adjacent trees. Before her as fair a landscape as any to be found in the Border: the tower of the old Norman church, surmounting the elms and limes that concealed the rest of the edifice; a valley of flat pasture dotted with cattle, that grazed near the confluence of the Wandle and the Windrush, and musical with the drowsy hum of mill-wheels set in action by those strong though tranquil currents; and in the distance the Atterbury hills, over which the first sombre light of the coming eve was imperceptibly stealing.

Bessie's garden hat was lying on the gravel at her feet, and a light silk shawl had slipped from her shoulders to the back of her rustic chair. Looking towards the Atterbury hills, she wore upon her face an expression of such intense happiness that James Stapleton had good cause to hesitate ere he broke upon meditations that were so manifestly fruitful of happiness. That she had come to the spot with the intention of working at her picture, the artistic appliances that covered a part of the rude seat were evidence; but she had neither opened her box of paints nor made any preparation for work. "She is thinking of something pleasant to herself; far better so than toiling at a picture to please other people,"

thought James Stapleton,—as his eyes rested with pure and passionless admiration on the glossy brown hair that, notwithstanding the silky softness of its texture, rose with a ripple from the white forehead of which it hid the uppermost inch ; as he surveyed the bonny roundness of her waxen cheek, and the gentle frankness of her regular but free and unformal profile ; as he marked the black lash of her half-averted eye, and the ruddy tenderness of the lips that were just far enough apart for some small and surpassingly white teeth to be apparent ; as his sight traced the harmonious lines of her bare neck, and the no less graceful curves of the delicate shoulders, well-developed bust, and dainty waist, that were covered, but not disguised, by the folds and cincture of her muslin dress.

It may not be thought that Bessie was a beauty without fault or flaw. Measured and judged by critical rules, she could not be extolled as a perfect example of any distinctive type of feminine loveliness ; but the most fastidious connoisseur of womanly shape and style, beholding her as she sat under the burning scarlet of the Virginian creeper, would have admitted that she was a young woman endowed with more than a common share of comeliness, and with the air which satisfies

masculine observers that a woman is well-bred—in a sense that makes no reference to social antecedents or circumstances—before they have heard her utter a word. In a ball-room of London beauties she would not have dazzled or created any kind of sensation; but in a calm domestic scene she would have sustained comparison with women of greater brilliance and more showy attractions.

There are faces with which no man who has outlived the period of boyish impulsiveness would fall in love at first sight; and yet they take a stronger and more enduring hold of masculine sentiment than looks that captivate more quickly. They belong to a comparatively abundant kind of comeliness. Peeping through carriage-windows, or bright with ruddy glow caught by horse-exercise in the parks, dozens of them may be encountered any day of the year in the western thoroughfares of London; and when in some hour of despondency or dulness a man of gentle nature and pure thought chances upon one of them in the course of a solitary ramble—at the turning of a street, in the formal gathering of a fashionable promenade, at the entrance of a bazaar, or in a quiet corner of a deserted square—it is marvellous how suddenly his dejection is replaced

by hope, and bright thoughts come unsought to his quickened brain. Rousing no thought that a man would hesitate to utter to his mother, or sister, or wife, the sight of these fair faces in our public ways is not the least important of those influences to which Western civilization is indebted for its superiority to the civilization of lands where woman veils her countenance whenever she moves beyond the walls of her dreary home.

Of such faces Bessie Clayton's was one.

It was a power of goodness and a source of beneficial pleasure to hundreds with whom she had no familiar intercourse—to hundreds with whom she never exchanged a word. The tradesmen standing at their shop-doors paid court to it for a smile whenever it appeared in the High-street; and for a moment her smile—never sought in vain—inclined the bitterest sectarian of the borough to think that after all the Church could not be far wrong whilst it had so fair a worshipper, that the dissenter was not without apology who had so affable and gracious a niece. From childhood she had led a secluded life so far as Carlton Cross was concerned. Her private friendships were few, for whilst her connexion with the Established Church precluded her from close intimacy with the dissenters of the town, the

orthodox gentlefolk had not altogether adopted her as one of their own select set. Belonging to neither of the two great parties into which Carlton Cross was divided, she was a connecting link between both; and it said not a little for her amiability and tact that she was as popular with the one side as the other. Indeed, Miss Bessie Clayton was a universal favourite, and commanded the good words of simple and gentle. Even the market-women never tried to cheat her, and Cornel Kilderbee maintained that they were less inclined to take an unfair advantage over their other customers when they had just had dealings with his winsome housekeeper.

That she was much cleverer than her neighbours there is no reason for thinking. At school she was never thought deficient in mother-wit; and when her educational course came to an end she returned to Carlton Cross equipped for life's battle with a sufficient smattering of French, a highly creditable knowledge of the rule of three, some proficiency in an execrable style of water-colour art, a well-trained voice, and a perfect mastery of the ingenious caligraphic trick known to writing-masters as a lady's running-hand. Certain facts, however, countenance the impression that she was less distinguished for mental

sharpness than natural goodness amongst the schoolmates with whom she was a universal and particular favourite. Inquiry has ascertained that whereas she carried off numerous prizes for "good conduct," "industry," and "lady-like demeanour," she never won a similar recognition of her attainments in any of those various departments of learning in which Miss Discipline's young ladies were sedulously instructed. Moreover, it rests on good authority that, though no lady of the Border wrote a prettier letter, Bessie Clayton was apt to make noticeable trips in her spelling whenever she put pen to paper without having her Johnson's dictionary close at hand.

Certain also is it that, like many another true and loving Englishwoman before her time, Bessie never vexed her brain over problems more difficult than those which her appointed instructors in arithmetic submitted to her notice. It may be questioned whether she knew or even suspected that life had riddles which wise men vainly tried to solve. Knowing only a little, she never cared to penetrate beneath the surface of that little. She knew that Carlton Cross was divided into Church people and dissenters; but how the divisions came about, whether it would be better or pleasanter if all people thought alike, and whe-

ther tweedle-dum was any nearer the truth than tweedle-dee, were questions to which she never gave a moment's consideration. All her views respecting truth consisted in her certain knowledge that it was wicked and contemptible to tell or act falsehoods. She knew that there were Tories and Whigs, and that at elections Tories wore blue and Whigs yellow favours; and this, so far as she knew or wished to know, was the sum of the difference between them. She was a very clever hand at turning out rosettes, and whenever an election occurred in the borough she first made a yellow favour for her uncle, and then a blue rosette for the rector. It had never occurred to her that there was anything strange in the fact that she was a Churchwoman whilst her uncle was a dissenter. Compared with the erudite young gentlewomen of the present day, who take sides in every political or scientific contest that is fought upon the social stage, and have their views respecting every theory propounded by Ruskin, and every law demonstrated by Mill, Bessie must be set down for a sad dunce; and yet it may be questioned whether her unconscious and uninquiring ignorance was not quite as serviceable an armour as the curious and uncertain knowledge of the studious

book-making lasses who sit now-a-days under learned lecturers in Albemarle-street.

Nor may it be imagined that Bessie was a poor conversationalist because she was but a simpleton with respect to the learning of the schools. An amiable sympathy with her neighbours of every degree, and an active interest in their affairs, supplied her tongue with quite as good topics as any she could have borrowed from poets and philosophers. Though no lover of gossip in the unkindly signification of the term, she was always well furnished with the latest news of the borough and the Border ; and it was pleasant to mark the animation and innocent sprightliness with which she tossed about the prattle of the hour as she passed it on to other hearers. Without ever falling into flippancy or heedlessness—the besetting sins of racy talkers—she had a power of speech that won the hearts of listeners. It was not brilliant or noticeable for originality ; but the rich, innocent, exhilarating music by which a serenely joyous nature repaid with interest the happiness that it derived from life.

Her peculiar attractiveness lay chiefly in her possession of a quality which is distinct from beauty of feature, grace of form, delicacy of

colour, and yet is so closely allied to each of these principal ingredients of personal beauty, that not seldom it is regarded as the result of their harmonious combination rather than as a separate and independent power. Coming mysteriously and passing away as unaccountably—like the excellence that for a few summers distinguishes a particular flower from all others of its kind, and then suddenly vanishes, to the perplexity of gardeners and physiologists—this quality appears and disappears in obedience to no ascertained laws, rendering particular families conspicuous for dignity of expression, graciousness of demeanour, charm of presence, and then by a sudden desertion of the once-favoured stocks, giving scientific observers fresh instances of inexplicable deterioration of species. In this country it never exists amongst the very poor; but the frequency with which it quickens and glorifies simple families in the lower grades of the middle class demonstrates that it is no distinctive attribute of ancient aristocracies. For manifest reasons one would expect to find it abounding more largely in the patrician and gentle than in the humbler classes of society; but it would be easy to mention families upon families of the bluest of blue blood in whom this

subtle endowment is conspicuous by reason of its total absence. No tongue can define, no pen can describe it; the painter's brush can do no more than indicate it. For want of a better name people are wont to call it "good breeding;" and yet it has been known to distinguish the sons and daughters of humble and ill-descended yeomen—men who got their breeding at the plough-tail, and women who caught the visible charm as they churned butter and milked cows.

CHAPTER XVI.

In which James Stapleton sees how it all is.

IT is impossible to say how long James Stapleton would have continued to stand, silently gazing at the girl to whom he was summoning his courage to make an offer, had not a certain huge and ruddy apple, taking the only course left open to it by circumstances, fallen from its parent tree with startling resonance upon the ground immediately behind the spot where he was stationed. No sooner had the fruit touched the earth with a heavy thump than, suddenly roused from her meditations by the phenomenon with which one Isaac Newton is intimately associated in the popular mind, Bessie quickly turned her face in the direction of her admirer, and as quickly manifested her surprise and confusion at finding his eyes upon her.

“It’s only an apple, Bessie,” said the simple blunderer, misreading the blush which covered her face, and misconstruing the momentary ex-

pression of something akin to affright that crossed her countenance in a trice; "surely you are not to be startled by such a trifle as that."

"It was not the apple, but you, that frightened me," explained Bessie, frankly confessing the agitation which she knew herself to have betrayed by her looks. "How did you come here?"

There was small encouragement to the suitor in this commencement, for though Bessie's words expressed no wish that he had kept away, her embarrassment and the pitch of her voice signified that she would rather have been left alone.

"I came over the grass, Bessie," he answered, "and found you so occupied with your own thoughts that you neither heard my steps, nor when I had drawn quite near to you felt my presence. Perhaps I ought to have made you aware that I was so close at hand—perhaps you would like me now to leave you alone?"

"Leave me alone!—why should you?" inquired Bessie, with her usual cordiality, as she recovered her self-possession and awoke to the fact that she had given her friend a cold greeting. Thus speaking, she looked up at him quickly, brightening her face with one of those sunny smiles that are amongst the common-form blandishments of guileless women no less than of

practised flirts; and as she thus atoned for her previous lack of complaisance, a stranger standing by James's side would have marked the contrast between the darkness of her hair and the soft, liquid, somewhat disappointing greyness of her timid eyes.

“Leave me alone!—why should you?” she repeated, pushing her paint-box and folio aside, so that James might take a share of her seat. “You surely are not afraid of me, or think that I am sorry to see you, because you startled me for a moment? Come here, Mr. Stapleton, and let us enjoy the old valley together.”

The exceptional nature of their intimacy was shown by the fact that whilst James addressed her by her Christian name, she persisted in using towards him the more distant and respectful style of address which she had naturally employed when she was but a child and used to look up to him reverentially as one of her superiors. Of late they had come closer together, and for years the disparity of their ages had not hindered them from holding intercourse on terms of perfect equality; but still the manner of each towards the other retained signs of the old days when he was her condescending patron, she his pet plaything.

“You are very kind, Bessie,” he answered, in his usual tone, availing himself of the invitation to share her seat; “but all the same for that, I have behaved badly, and if you chose to scold me I could not charge you with injustice. It was impudence and bad breeding in me to stand there so long, watching the colour of your cheek and the shape of your lips, and trying to guess your thoughts from the rate of your breathing; but the fact is, the look of your face according with the thought that was uppermost in my mind when I entered the garden, seemed to take from me the power of speech, whilst by way of compensation, I suppose, it gave me a delicious confidence and hope.”

“Indeed!” rejoined Bessie, colouring again, as her pale eyes glanced shyly at him from beneath their long lashes. “I am vain enough to like being told that my looks can do so much, and I am curious enough to wish for further particulars. What do you hope for from me? I’ll do my best not to disappoint you.”

“Thank you for *that* promise; come, give me your hand upon it.”

“Is not a woman’s word enough, Mr. Stapleton? Well, since you ask me, and since I want to learn what the hope is, I give you my hand. There, but you mayn’t hurt it.”

“Let it lie there, Bessie,” James entreated, as his long, heavy fingers closed gently over the small hand which she had placed deliberately in the middle of his outstretched palm, “while I speak to you about a matter of some importance to both of us. There is no more room for fear that I shall deal roughly with it than for fear that it may deal roughly with others. It is not the first time that you’ve allowed me to nurse it. Don’t you remember, Bessie, in your long illness, until the fever had quite left you, you wouldn’t go to sleep unless I held it—as I do now?”

“I remember.”

“Then don’t fear to let me hold it.”

“Times must alter strangely before I shall fear you, Mr. Stapleton.”

“Before I tell you my hope, let me say something about the look that just now gave me hope that I might get my hope. You are always beautiful in no common degree to my eyes, and it is not often that your face is darkened with sorrow. I am accustomed to see pleasure as well as beauty in your face, Bessie; but just now you looked as if you were steeped in joy. Upon your lips, your brow, your tranquil face, there was such a visible glory of excessive and intense happiness, that I said to myself, ‘She may

go from this spot and forthwith be smitten with a terrible grief, and never again escape from the grip of misfortune, and yet the memory of the moments she is now living will make her to the end of her existence thankful for the gift of life.' Never, Bessie, in all my life, had I seen such happiness on a human face."

To the enquiring tone in which he put these last words Bessie answered in a low, tremulous voice, singularly expressive of fervour and gratitude—"Your eyes did not deceive you. I was unspeakably happy—unspeakably happy. God alone can tell how happy He has made me. I have in me more joy than one heart knows what to do with."

"Then share it with another."

"I will—I *have!*" ejaculated Bessie, as a sudden fear fell upon her, together with a perception of the drift of her companion's words, and the significance of his strong emotion.

"I saw it, I read the truth," continued James Stapleton, on whom Bessie's last words were as completely lost as though they had never been uttered—as though no painful suspicion, no terrifying discovery had wrung from her a revelation of that which it was her intention to keep yet a little longer from the knowledge of all the world

save herself and one other person ; “ and I dared to interpret it as an omen that the hope which I have cherished for years would not be disappointed, and now——”

“ Mr. Stapleton, dear Mr. Stapleton, do let me,” she interposed, with an air of acute and uncontrollable anxiety ; but the entreaty thus begun was stopped at its outset by a sudden failure of power to put in any language the thoughts that, promptly spoken, might have saved her some of the humiliation, though they could have spared her but little of the pain which the event of that afternoon was destined to confer upon her. For a moment her left hand was raised in warning, in expostulation, in pitiful prayer, and then, as though conscious of its impotence to discharge the office of the paralysed tongue, it fell helplessly beside the right hand which still remained in her companion’s firm hold. Then came from her eyes a look eloquent of anguish and dismay—a look which, like every other sign of her violent disturbance, was totally misconstrued by the blind, honest, loyal blunderer, who forthwith proceeded to inflict on the object of his unselfish love an anguish far sharper and more enduring than any suffering that can be wrought by rack, or boot, or any other ingenious contrivance for

the production of physical torture. One moment more, and she knew that this last mute appeal had failed to achieve its purpose, and then, dropping her face upon her hands—the hand that was free, and the hand which the executioner retained—the poor, shivering, sobbing creature submitted herself to the lash, and uttered not a cry throughout her punishment.

Its infliction did not occupy *very* many moments. As is the wont of simple and terribly earnest suitors, when they are in the very act of preferring their momentous question, James stammered a great deal, and repeated the same words several times before he managed to put in sufficiently intelligible, though by no means accurate language, his wish that the girl—the convulsions of whose frame were visible to him as he spoke—would surrender herself into his custody for life ; to be the inmate of his home, the sharer of his fortunes, the mother of his children. It was soon over. Hesitations, vain repetitions, and cumbersome involvements of speech notwithstanding, the final utterance of James's proposal was made in something less than three minutes ; but in that short space of time thought followed thought, memory succeeded memory, and inference begat inference so rapidly in Bessie's mind, that she

may be said to have relived in it many years of her past life, and as she so lived them over again, to have seen for the first time the significance and importance of incidents which, at the dates of their occurrence, she had thought of no real moment. As a revelation no less convincing than sudden, the discovery came upon her that James Stapleton had been her suitor throughout those years ; that what she had regarded as his friendship was nothing less than his love ; worse still, that in responding with simple affection to expressions utterly misread, she had given him grounds to think that she recognised the real nature of his attachment, and was not indisposed to satisfy its ambition. Though even in that passage of sharp misery and humiliating discoveries her conscience assured her of the innocence and perfect womanliness of her demeanour towards him, she saw clearly that her conduct—in fact, though not in design—had been very cruel, and that she would have small right to reproach him with injustice if his loyal and unsuspecting nature should be unable to acquit her of a purpose to trifle with his heart.

Novels had taught Bessie that since no man ever made an offer without giving the woman of his choice clear intimations of his design, it always

lay within a woman's power to spare a suitor the pain of actual refusal by responding to those premonitory indications in such a manner as to assure him that his course of action would result in disappointment. Novels also had told Bessie that under these circumstances the girl was justly chargeable with unfeminine levity and heartlessness who found herself embarrassed with an offer which she was not in a position or the humour to accept. Of course nothing can be more ridiculous or unjust than these dicta of romantic art ; but they were the main supports of a grand theory respecting matrimonial overtures which novelists of a departed generation sedulously impressed on their readers—for the convenience of woman's natural pursuers, and for the suppression of what our grandmothers used to call coquetry. And in Bessie's simple mind this stupendous theory, and all its accompanying corollaries, had been accepted as matters of ascertained truth. Even in these enlightened days, when the feminine mind is fashioned to honour and command by learned graduates and collegiate studies, there are more than a few young ladies who get their notions of right and wrong from circulating libraries.

When James Stapleton's entreaty had closed

with one of those abrupt dead stops which play a conspicuous and no less awkward part in the eloquence of honest gentlemen who are so fearfully in earnest as to lose all command of their respiratory organs, Bessie found herself able to reply. The rapid stream of thoughts had restored her power of speech; and she forthwith exercised it not after her old wont and in her familiar voice, but in sharp, quick sentences, and in a tone that was at the same time weak and earnest, defensive and supplicatory.

But ere she spoke a single syllable, she raised her head and exhibited to James's astonished gaze a countenance that gave her words strange strength by indicating their weakness and utter impotence to set forth the magnitude and bitterness of the trouble that possessed her. From that face—just now so beautiful and eloquent of happiness that it filled even the lover with surprise—the bloom, the joy, all the colour, and nearly all the loveliness had vanished. It was the white, disfigured face of a scared woman; the lips were white, and mental pain was visible in their twitching; and it terrified James to see that no tears had fallen from her eyes, although the force of her emotions had caused her to sob audibly.

“I must have been very wrong, Mr. Stapleton,”

she said, when those dry and unutterably wretched eyes had rested upon his for half a minute. "I wish to take no excuse to myself from my unobservance, which can have been nothing but a consequence of my incurable selfishness. I see it all now quite plainly ; and the shame is mine already, as the remorse will ever be mine, that I failed to see what I ought to have seen ; and that by my culpable blindness I have caused you pain, and rendered myself contemptible in your eyes. Of course when I assure you that this was the case, I cannot hope that you will believe me. I must appear very wicked and despicable to you—and for a time I *would* appear so to you ; for now that you have learnt that it's no use your loving me, it will comfort you and satisfy you to despise me, and hold me unworthy any good man's love."

"Can't you indeed love me ? Is there no room for hope, Bessie ?" James inquired, gruffly, but with no lack of gentleness.

"Mr. Stapleton, don't ask me so again," returned Bessie, shrinking again as though a whip had been thrown over her. "I can't bear it ; it will kill me. Rather call me a cruel name, and cover me with your scorn, and leave me deadened with the blows of your disdain ; but don't—oh ! in your mercy don't agonize me with another

entreaty to which I must answer 'No.' For one instant, dear Mr. Stapleton, let me speak ; for I must tell you more, so that by-and-by you may think of me in kindness. If some years since—ay, if so late as two years ago—I had suspected that you wished me to love you, I would have tried to do so, and I am sure I could have done so ; for you are so very good, as my uncle says, and you are so gentle to the poor, and all the Border takes pride in you and has praise for you. But I never suspected until you spoke just now—I never entertained the thought—that you wished for me as a wife. You see, we are such old friends ; I used to sit upon your knee when I was a child ; you have been so much with us as my uncle's constant friend and daily gossip ; I grew up so used to your kindness, that it never occurred to me that it meant anything, except—except—that you *were* kind. Oh ! do you see how this was ?”

“ Yes, I see how it was,” James responded, mechanically.

“ And then just two years since it was that I first began to suspect that some one else loved me—ay, more—to know it. That closed my eyes all the more to the true meaning of your goodness. If at times I felt that you were more than usually tender and benignant to me, I thought it

might be because, as his friend, you saw something of his secret or something of mine, and put a higher price upon me because I was dear to him, or took a deeper interest in me because you saw that he was dear to me. Our secret has been our own—that is, mine has been mine, and his his; but still, though I knew that he never mentioned his to you, it always felt to me that you had discovered something of it or of mine. More than once when a fear seized me that his care for me was only a passing fancy, your gentleness reassured me with hope that your friend would one day be my own. And now on this day, which was the joyfullest, and has become the most miserable of my life—on this day when he has actually made his offer, and has promised to speak to my uncle to-morrow—— Why, Mr. Stapleton, when you first began to talk to me about the happiness in my face, I fancied that Herrick had sent you” (the faintest possible tint of colour came to Bessie’s pale face as she uttered the Christian name of the man whom she had accepted) “to congratulate me on our joy. Oh! don’t you see how it all is?”

James would have been strangely blind had he not seen how it all was after such a full explanation.

“ And now on this day,” Bessie continued with a shudder, as her sorrow suddenly became more passionate, “ on which I gain him, you lose him—you lose your friend—and will regard him as an enemy.”

There was a sudden change in the colour of the fires that burnt in the recesses of James Stapleton’s cavernous brows ; and the effect of that change was that Bessie exclaimed, with a voice that was one of ecstasy rather than dejection, “ Then you *do* see it all ? and you don’t despise me ? and you do forgive me ? and you won’t be his enemy ? but you will be good to us both ? Oh, thank God ! thank God !” And having thus spoken in a wild and ejaculatory fashion, Bessie Clayton with both her hands raised James Stapleton’s right hand to her lips and covered it with kisses, as the tears leaped into her eyes and fell freely.

In a minute she was calmer.

Then James Stapleton rose ; and whilst Bessie retained her place on the garden-chair, he stood over her and raised towards his lips the little white hand which through the greater part of this strange interview had continued in his grasp. But before he kissed it he said, with the tenderest music of his sonorous voice—in accents that were

clear and unbroken, and yet throughout the speech seemed that at the next word they would acknowledge the victory of emotion—"You're a pure, gentle creature, Bessie. My love for you is of such a sort that it will never die; and I do passionately thank you for having made me able to love you so—for I have a fancy on me now that it is a ladder by which I can climb to Heaven. As to Herrick: he has been my old friend, and when you're his wife I'll do him all the good I can, because he'll be your husband. You mayn't love me, dear—you can't love me—but you can say a prayer for me now and then."

Then for a few seconds—ere he turned away and hastened from the garden—James Stapleton pressed the white hand to his lips.

It was not till he was out of sight that Bessie saw the tear which he had left upon it.

CHAPTER XVII.

A Bitter Pill.

NOT caring to be the herald of his own misfortune, James Stapleton was hastening from the scene of his discomfiture, in the hope of getting quit of Green Villa without another interview with Bessie's uncle until he should be better able to recount the circumstances of his disaster, when Cornelius Kilderbee, emerging from a shrubbery of laurestines, came right upon him just as he was within twelve feet of the garden gate.

An apprehension that matters had gone unfavourably betrayed itself in the anxious air and livid pallor of the veteran's face, as, with an assumption of jocosity that accorded ill with his countenance, he inquired, "Whither away, my lad? You are not bent on giving me the slip before you have reported progress?"

"Ill news travels fast enough," was James's brief response.

"Ill news, eh?" rejoined the old politician, sharply. "What's the counter-amendment? Has she moved an adjournment for six months?"

“Worse than that, sir—for ever.”

“What? what?” gasped Cornelius Kilderbee, intense agitation convulsing his features and staying his utterance.

“I mean it, sir. It can’t be.”

“Why,” ejaculated the senior, raising his tone to a higher key, “she can’t have flung out the bill? She has not rejected the measure outright?”

“Outright, outright; and in a fashion that leaves no hope.”

“No hope!—fiddlesticks! There must be a dissolution. She must appeal to the country, my boy—she must take the sense of the country. And, thank God, I am the country, and, please the pigs, the country will tell her its mind in pretty plain terms! I’ll be off to her now—this very instant. There, there, be off. I’ll go and tell her what is her duty to me, and you, and every one else.”

The violence with which the old man uttered the concluding words of this memorable statement of opinion alarmed James for Bessie’s peace of mind, and made him see that he could do her a good service by relieving her of the unpleasant task of revealing to her uncle the exact state of the case. Indeed, his conscience was pricked by the thought that he had been on the

point of quitting the field without thus providing for her peace of mind.

“She spoke to me with the gentleness that never leaves her—the gentleness that is the spirit of her life,” explained James, lowering his voice so that no third person might overhear him, “and refused me in such a manner that I would rather die than pain her by renewing my suit. As you love me, my dear sir—as you love her and would have no single bitter thought live in her memory of you when you are in the grave—be careful to say no word, to look no look, that can trouble her. God only knows how I have been torturing her. Why, I have been trampling on her like a savage who dances in his brutal fury on the body of a prostrate foe; but there was no savagery in me, except the cruel rage and savagery of love. But I’ll make atonement for it.”

“Why wont she have you?” inquired the practical listener, who could get no clear meaning from James’s self-accusatory ejaculations.

“She loves another.”

“She told you so?”

“She did.”

For a few moments an expression of intense surprise held Cornelius Kilderbee’s face, and then, with a sudden change of thought, air,

tone—a change the suddenness and completeness of which were almost laughable—he observed, in a dry, matter of fact voice—“Bedad! she loves another! What’s bred in the blood comes out in the bone. She tells you she loves another—why, that’s just what her grandmother told me more than half a century since.”

So fully occupied with his anxiety for Bessie that he gave no heed to this singular confession, James Stapleton was renewing his entreaty in her behalf when Mr. Kilderbee abruptly checked him by saying—“That’s enough—that’s enough, boy. You needn’t fear for me or her. I am neither fool enough nor mad enough to break my own china with a kitchen poker. But who’s the other fellow? What’s his name? Not young Morehead, eh?”

For an instant James shrank from completing the work which he had begun, so perfectly assured was he that no proposal for Bessie’s settlement could be more unacceptable to the merchant than that she and her fortune should be made over to the heir of his old antagonists, Hercules and Ambrose Kingsford.

Another moment, and having overcome his momentary weakness, James told the unwelcome truth—that Bessie had promised to become Her-
rick’s wife.

Lacking the nerve to look at the face of the old man whilst he thus shattered his dearest hopes and placed in their stead a hateful prospect, James dropped his eyes as he made the unpalatable announcement; but it needed not the assistance of sight to assure the speaker that the old man was profoundly affected.

“What!” slowly said the veteran, in a quavering voice, when he had heard all, “is it not enough that I may not give my darling to the boy of my own heart, but must I also give her to that pert, up-looking, false-hearted whipper-snapper, whose father, the lawyer, tried to make me a felon—whose uncle, the Tory banker, looks down upon me as so much dirt,—whose whole family I hate—like poison?”

“Sir,” rejoined James, with loyal pathos, “I feel for your trial as much as you feel for mine.” After a moment’s break he added, “It’s a great consolation to me to hear you speak of her so kindly.”

There was silence between the two men for a minute, and then the elder dismissed his companion with these words, “Doctor, you’ve given me a bitter pill without a scrap of gilding on it;—and if I must swallow it, I’ll *bite it down* and feast on its bitterness.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

James Stapleton's Second Choice.

HAVING left Cornelius Kilderbee in the act of biting his bitter pill, and passed beyond the gates of Green Villa, James Stapleton took half-a-dozen steps in the direction of his house, when for the first time in his life he experienced the sorrow of the man who dreads to re-enter his own door. The amber light of evening was already stealing away the blueness of the undarkened sky ; and just as strong distaste for home took possession of his mind, he had a keen perception of the pleasant and picturesque effects which the light created in his mother's antiquated tea-room. But the familiar features of the place filled his breast with a strong though transitory wish that he could turn his back on the old red house, and withdraw himself from every object that could remind him of his native borough.

How should he summon fortitude to meet his mother's curious glance and searching questions ?

—how should he endure the compassion that she would lavish upon him? or—worse still to bear—the angry judgments which she would no less liberally shower on what she would term Bessie’s misconduct? Under ordinary circumstances no number of petty irritations could ruffle his temper; but just now, whilst the first pain of his disappointment was at its sharpest, he felt that the trivial gossip of his sister and the suspicious glances of his mother, eagerly waiting “to hear all about it,” would have goaded and maddened him into uncontrollable fury.

Anyhow he would not return to his house until his sister’s departure should have reduced the enemy to one-half their present numbers, and he should have reviewed the events of the afternoon and all the facts of his position. Instinct also assured him that a severe spell of bodily exercise would be the best means of tranquillizing his shaken nerves. So, turning abruptly from the town, he set his face towards the least frequented district of the neighbouring country, in order that he might contend in solitude with the anger, vindictiveness, self-scorn, and half a score other devils of the same brood, that were already at high war with his better nature, and fighting for the permanent tenure of his generous heart.

Half an hour, an hour—ay, an hour and ten minutes, did Archdeacon Howlett's daughter postpone the brewing of her tea, in the full certainty that after a successful visit to Green Villa her son would return to drink something more than his customary allowance of strong Pekoe.

“It's useless to wait longer for him, mother,” urged James's favourite sister with a sigh of dissatisfaction at her brother's absence and the unreasonable postponement of the beverage for which she had a strong womanly partiality. “Of course it's some urgent case that keeps him away, for he saw me as I drove into town; and I am sure—though my marriage” (this parenthesis in a tone of grievance) “naturally makes him care less for me than he did—that nothing but urgent professional business can account for his absence.”

Sorely was Archdeacon Howlett's daughter tempted to tell James's favourite sister that she did not know everything; that she was even then talking of a matter which lay beyond the lines of her knowledge; that her brother, as all well-informed persons knew, had conceived an honourable passion for Miss Bessie Clayton; that, notwithstanding many obvious reasons which might be urged against such a match, she (the speaker

and recognised leader of the medical profession of the Border) had waived all her maternal and unassailable rights of objection; that in consequence of this generous abnegation of self on her part James had proposed to Miss Clayton; that as a matter of course Miss Clayton, without any affectation of uncertainty or coolness, had, with no less gratitude than eagerness, seized the eligible offer; and that the urgent case which accounted for James's absence was nothing else than his not unnatural preference for tea made by Miss Clayton to any such comparatively flavourless and unworthy Pekoe as his mother was accustomed to give him.

But Mrs. Stapleton fortunately put a rein on her tongue. Not that she had any misgiving as to the result of her head-assistant's visit to Green Villa, or was in fear that, by so speaking, she would stray beyond the bounds of truth. She was as thoroughly convinced that James had made his offer and been accepted as she would have been had she received his personal assurance of the fact. James had left the house to make the offer; he never failed to carry out any purpose that he had deliberately formed: ergo, he *had* made the offer. On the other hand, James was a great match for Bessie Clayton; it was

matter of certainty that she had not in any way pre-engaged herself to another man ; a combination of circumstances rendered it utterly impossible that she could have been such a fool as to reject him ;—ergo, she had accepted him. With a perfectly easy conscience could the truthful Mrs. Stapleton have spoken in historic fashion of her son's engagement as a matter actually accomplished.

Luckily she was restrained from making an untimely and inaccurate communication by her keen enjoyment of a secret which was the property of a very small and extremely select circle—an enjoyment that would of course diminish as the circle widened ; and by the consideration that, whilst reticence would give her grounds for future triumph over James's favourite sister, it would also prove a salutary piece of discipline to that young and inexperienced matron, teaching her that even after their marriage daughters were less honourable and prescient things than the mothers who gave them birth. Moreover, a latent fear of James's displeasure—an influence that had considerable force with the imperious little woman who appeared to rule her submissive son with a rod of iron—turned the balance of Mrs. Stapleton's meditations in favour of discreet silence.

So the leading medical practitioner of the Border contented herself with announcing to her daughter that she had decided to withdraw altogether from active professional life, that the family practice and its income would forthwith devolve on her head-assistant, but that she had determined to remain in her old quarters, in order that her professional successor might have the benefit of her daily counsel and supervision. This communication made, together with the suggestive and vaguely prophetic declaration that mortals might lay plans but the future was beyond their control, the tea-service was at length demanded, and without further delay the mother and her married daughter made the pompous meal known in those days as high tea—Mrs. Stapleton, in her child's honour, using the William the Third china, and pouring the aromatic tea from the sacred silver teapot of the departed Howletts—a teapot that stood high above the surrounding china on a four-legged silver table of its own, and, by the giraffish curvature no less than by the conspicuous length of its graceful spout, implied its ability to furnish tea in the politest of fashions for the houses over the way, or in case of need for all the genteeler people of the parish.

In due course the white pony was ordered, so that its mistress might return to her home before dark; and after every excuse for further delay, James's favourite sister took whip in hand and drove homewards without seeing her brother.

When her daughter had taken her departure, Mrs. Stapleton began to grow impatient for her son's reappearance.

Having demanded candles with unaccustomed asperity, Archdeacon Howlett's daughter seated herself in her lonely tea-room, and began to nurse bitter thoughts about neglectful sons and malapert daughters-in-law, until her little gold repeater struck ten o'clock.

Then she was pleased to "send the house to bed," that is to say, she rang bells sharply, and in needlessly petulant terms declared that the "house should not be kept up any longer," that in her youth "houses were never kept up till next day," that it was not in the nature of things that a "house could do its work next day if it did not get its proper amount of sleep."

Having by these and other equally agreeable and necessary means dismissed her domestics for the night, and sent the house to bed with what the homelier folk of the Border are wont to call "a flea in the ear," Mrs. Stapleton gave proof of

her singular energy and vigour by preparing to sit up for her son's return. At whatever hour he might come back, she was resolved to be stirring and ready to hear all the news. "It's that low-minded radical who keeps him," the lady muttered—"who keeps him drinking brandy-and-water and smoking odious pipes, while natural anxiety for my boy's welfare wont let me sleep. But I *must* see him to-night ; I *wont* wait till to-morrow." Like a prudent woman, however, Mrs. Stapleton took time by the forelock, performing her nocturnal devotions and effecting certain arrangements, so that after receiving her son's report she might be free to follow in the steps of the house with more than ordinary expedition. These measures accomplished, she returned to her tea-room, and taking up the late archdeacon's copy of Whiston's "Josephus," as a work occupying a middle ground between secular and sacred literature, and therefore likely to meet the case of a gentlewoman who would fain while away a solemn hour for an unquestionably worldly purpose, she sat herself down to read.

"Josephus," even as he is presented to us by the accomplished Mr. Whiston, is not the liveliest of writers ; and either through the author's want of sprightliness, or through the lateness of the

hour, or from the combination of the two circumstances, Mrs. Stapleton's head was beginning to nod when she was roused suddenly from her drowsiness by the sound of her son's latch-key in the lock of the hall-door.

With a beating heart she listened to his movements whilst he barred the outer door and put up the chain, whilst his steps crossed the hall to the hat-stand, and then returned towards the entrance of her tea-room.

In another moment the door opened and he stood before her, wearing a look that checked the words of playful welcome with which she was about to greet him. His face was pale from agitation and fatigue; but it was its air of sad and solemn purpose, rather than its unaccustomed pallor and weariness, that smote her to the heart, bringing all her maternal affection into sudden play.

“My boy, my dear boy, surely something has gone amiss!” she said, extending both her hands to him.

“I beg your pardon, dear, for keeping you up thus late,” he answered, with more than his ordinary tenderness, and less than his usual formality; “had I thought that my absence would have kept you from bed I would have returned

sooner. But I am glad to find you here ; I have something to say to you which I should like to say now."

His tone, air, countenance satisfied her so thoroughly as to the failure of his afternoon's mission that she forbore to ask how he had fared at Green Villa.

"Listen to me, mother," he said, when he had drawn a chair and seated himself directly opposite her.

"I am listening, James."

"You told me a few nights since that Emma Harrison loved me?"

"I did," the mother answered, faintly.

"And she *does* love me?"

"James, you remember what I so unwisely made known to you," she replied, with increasing surprise. "Do you wish me to repeat my words?"

"No, no, I remember them. But tell me, were they exactly true? Did you heighten nothing—colour nothing too highly? Was it *all* literally true?"

In a hoarse whisper the poor lady, who was thoroughly frightened by this unexpected examination, answered, with evident reluctance, "It was all true, and I bitterly repent having told it."

A pause of painful silence followed.

There was an habitual music in James's bass voice, a music that stirred its hearers deeply whenever it obeyed the higher impulses of his unselfish nature; but never had it more powerfully affected his mother than now, when he said firmly, slowly, and with all the gentleness of great strength—

“Bessie is engaged to Herrick Kingsford. My old schoolmate has won my love. I cannot have my wish; but you shall have yours, and she shall have hers. Emma Harrison shall be my wife; and if God will give me his help she shall have a good husband.”

“But, my boy, how can that be since you do not love her?” urged the mother, startled out of her ordinary worldliness and raised above the level of her constitutional selfishness by the sacredness and nobility of her son's emotion and purpose.

The sad smile that for a moment played over his pale face and then passed away was due perhaps to a sudden recollection of how widely different a doctrine she had inculcated only a few days before. If so, the memory passed from him quickly as the smile ere he replied, “Ay, but she loves me, and Heaven only knows what a hunger there is in me for love. I cannot afford to slight her love; it may be poor in comparison

with that which I hoped to win from Bessie ; but I must have it for my own happiness no less than hers. The bankrupt accepts with gratitude what he would have disdained when he was a millionaire ; and now that I am nothing better than a poor beggar I must do as beggars do, take with thanks what human charity offers."

"Emma's love is no beggar's pittance," his mother answered, wisely, and with a seasonable firmness for which James's heart upon the instant thanked her.

"God forbid that I should think it so," he rejoined, hastily, "and I do not regard it as any mean portion, though my speech did insult to it. The fact is, mother, I have been so beaten and pulled about this fearful night, that I have not strength left me to keep my mind or words in hand, and so it follows that my thoughts run wild. I am not so bitter as I seem ; I feel more gently than I can speak. I have been for a long walk over Boxmere Heath ; and as I sat in the dry heather, with the bright stars over me, and with the pure, cool breeze fluttering against me, the God who created the stars and the wind, and fashioned me in the palm of his hand, reconciled me in a certain numbing way to my sorrow, showed me the path of duty, and assured me it

was a path that would conduct me to happiness. His voice said audibly, 'Make others happy, and think lightly *of* and little *for* yourself.' That was all His rebuke of my selfishness in asking so much whilst I had resolved to give so little. I love Bessie better now than ever; to my death I shall be grateful to her for teaching me how to love. My passion for her is no vain thing; it has made a man of me."

"But it will not help you to love Emma," timorously interposed the mother's awakened conscience.

"Nay, dear, there you are wrong. It has already put me in the fair way to love her. In the desolation of my angry sadness this night it has been a pure comfort to me to know that she loved me; and no sooner had gratitude for her love possessed me than I thought, 'If this disappointment is hard to one whose loneliness is not complete, how much sharper must the same sorrow be to a poor, weak woman with nothing brighter before her than the blank despair of companionless existence.' Don't fear for me and her, mother. In a way I shall love her truly; in every way I shall make her very happy."

It was near the second hour of the morning when Mrs. Stapleton parted from her son and retired to rest.

But late as it was, and duly mindful though she was of a certain anticipatory performance of nocturnal devotion, she did not lie down to sleep ere she had offered another supplication to her Heavenly Father, praying more meekly and fervently and thankfully than she had done for many a long year.

CHAPTER XIX.

Explanatory, if not Apologetic.

HAD James Stapleton in five or six short hours reconciled himself to his loss of Bessie, or contrived to persuade himself that though his lot without her would lack the keenest and intensest bliss, he should be able to jog on contentedly and comfortably enough with Emma Harrison, readers might reasonably decline to trouble themselves further about so tame and meek a man. Had he really achieved that degree of philosophic resignation to his fate which his language to his mother might seem to indicate, they would have grounds for doubting the manliness of the nature that could so readily acquiesce in the decisions of adverse fortune, and so easily transfer its affections from one object to another.

But no failings were more remote from James Stapleton's character than feebleness of purpose, or want of persistency, or shallowness of sentiment. Notwithstanding its almost imperturbable good humour,ⁿ the most important and conspi-

cuous features of his moral constitution were resoluteness, fervour of affection, and a certain invincible pertinacity of thought, that in a less amiable and intelligent man would have degenerated into stubbornness. He was no faint, vapid, characterless being, but a man of clear though contracted mental vision and definite principles—a man the forces of whose brain and heart were not inadequately expressed by the massive strength and conciliating uncouthness of his person and appearance.

During his walk to Boxmere Heath, as soon as the stormier agitations of his mind had subsided, he saw with clearness and without exaggeration the nature of his disaster, the circumstances that had led to it, and the changes which it had effected in his relations with Bessie Clayton and Herrick Kingsford—the difficulties to which it had given rise, the embarrassments that might ensue from it. If he decided with quickness and startling promptitude on a new line of action, the rapidity with which he changed his front and adopted another plan was in no degree a result of fickleness or instability, but was chiefly due to his just and accurate perception of the necessities of his case.

It was clear to him that he had received a

wound—the scar, the pain, the disabling consequences of which would be permanent. It was evident to him that his earthly days would be but items in a career of duty, endurance, and sorrow ; and that, having recognised this stern fact, he had better keep it continually before his understanding, and at once relinquish all selfish care for his own hopeless case. Books and personal observation had taught him that men are sometimes required to bear burdens of grief from which there is no hope of liberation on this side the grave. To one man the burden is a personal shame that can never be survived ; to another it is despair for a sacred cause ; a third finds it in the memory of the disgrace or anguish that brought a comrade to the grave ; some find the galling load in remorse or self-scorn ; but of all wretches—for whose woe there is neither remedy nor alleviation—the commonest is he who works on slowly and manfully to the gate of eternity attended by a sense of awful and unutterable loneliness—a sense that daily and hourly whets anew the heart's appetite for a voice that is mute.

More than once in his past life—when domestic adversity and the trials of an anxious life had brought him into a closer acquaintance with sorrow, than any that young and vigorous men

are wont to form—James had debated within himself whether any such ever-present gloom was likely to fall to his share of life's experience, and how he should endure such a cross if the Divine hand imposed it upon him.

Consequently, now that it had arrived, this sorrow wore a familiar face, and was less terrible than it would otherwise have been. As he simply expressed it to his mother, it was manifest that "he was not to have his wish." All his dreams of personal delight were over; and in one hour after the death of the fairest and brightest of them all he saw—or thought he saw—that henceforth all his old sources of private satisfaction and individual pleasure would be little more than dry wells. His petty triumphs in his native town, the approval of his neighbours, the public opinion of the Border—the social standards by which he had been used to judge himself and measure his successes—had sunk into insignificance; and he perceived that whilst they would remain matters of slight moment, the judgments of his own conscience would henceforth be the only human judgments able to gratify him much or to wound him at all.

Under similar circumstances a vain man would have surrendered himself to impotent rage; a

malignant nature might have devised petty schemes of vengeance upon the woman who had rejected him, and the man whom she had accepted; an utter fool might have meditated suicide; a coward's first wish would have been to remove himself from the scene of his defeat; a merely selfish person would have looked around to see how he could best mitigate the peculiarly personal annoyances of his situation. Being neither vain, nor malignant, nor foolish, nor selfish, nor craven, James took none of the paths ordinarily taken by disappointed lovers. Had he been a perfectly free man—that is to say, bound by no tie of duty to a particular locality—it is possible that he would have withdrawn himself from Carlton Cross, not out of any miserable dread of local gossip, but in pure sorrow for the change that had come over the place. But so long as his mother lived James Stapleton was bound to his native town. During her life he could not retire from the borough, for the gratification of a purely personal humour, without incurring the guilt of filial undutifulness, and the dishonour of the officer who deserts the post which he has been appointed to defend.


It was his duty to remain in Carlton Cross—the fellow-townsmen of the friend whom he not

unreasonably charged with perfidy and deception ; the neighbour of the woman his unprofitable love of whom would, under any circumstances, remain the master passion of his life ; the daily associate of hundreds of persons to whom his past relations with Herrick Kingsford and Bessie Clayton would, in the natural course of things, be sooner or later an affair of talk. Certainly his marriage would diminish the number and importance of the embarrassments that threatened to disturb his intercourse with Cornelius Kilderbee's niece. As a bachelor he would be compelled to hold himself aloof from her society to a degree that would not be necessary when his union with Emma Harrison had taken place ; and for her sake, even more than for his own, he was loth to think that any permanent barrier would keep them apart. Even at that early period of his suffering it comforted him to think that he would still be allowed to maintain an appearance of their former friendship, to tend her in her hours of sickness, and be in distant years the friend of her children. It seemed to him that he could contribute to Bessie's happiness by marrying his cousin. Anyhow, his marriage would be acceptable to his mother, and make Emma a happy woman.

So instead of designing to wear the willow for the rest of his life, or playing for a time the awkward part of a disappointed lover, or taking any other course that would have been more in accordance with the traditions of romance, and perhaps more in agreement with the usages of real life, he accepted his lot bravely and with a good grace—removing from the gossips of the Border several manifest pretexts for curious inquiry respecting his intercourse with and regard for Bessie ; and adopting a line of action that will not be censured by those who rightly appreciate the various motives which inspired him to select it.

CHAPTER XX.

Friendship turned Sour.

F the painful consequences that would inevitably follow upon his resolution to maintain his ground in Carlton Cross, James Stapleton foresaw that the most irritating would arise from his altered relations to Herrick Kingsford. From childhood they had maintained the closest intimacy—an intimacy which on Herrick's part had been cordial good-fellowship, on James's part enthusiastic friendship. As boys they had been mates at school, companions in vacation; working side by side in the same classes, making common cause in playground quarrels; in summer holidays fishing together in the Windrush and the Wandle, playing together on the same cricket-grounds; in winter holidays skating on the same ice, spurring their Shetland ponies after the same harriers. At a later period they had chummed together in London, whilst the one learnt his profession in the office of a Lincoln's Inn solicitor and the other

walked the wards of his hospital. No difference of temper, taste, opinion, had ever disturbed an intercourse which to the less romantic of the two had been a source of unqualified satisfaction, to the more generous of the two an affair for continual gratitude—to both a connexion that differed in poetry and fervour from all their other friendships. To say that their mutual regard had surpassed the affection of brothers would fail to express the cordiality of their attachment. Next to his reverential devotion to his mother, and his love for Bessie, his loyal admiration for his friend had been the strongest sentiment of James's affectionate nature.

Himself excepted, Herrick cared for no one more than James. This fact should be borne in mind by those who wish to estimate rightly the lawyer's nature. Vain, and inflated with the peculiar arrogance of his self-seeking family, Herrick cared much less for anybody save himself than his plausible manner and good-humoured countenance led most people to suppose; but he was not incapable of generous emotion, and so far as he was capable of friendship, he had been James's sincere friend. According to the nature of Kingsfords, he deemed himself a vastly superior person to

“ dear old Jem,” adopting towards him an air of patronage that is amusing enough to those who care to think about it, and would have roused the resentment of any man less guileless and modest than James. But still he had again and again proved himself, in act as well as word, his dear old Jem’s firm friend. The Kingsfords had much influence, no family had more, in the borough and the Border, amongst all classes ; and this influence was consistently employed by Herrick to dear old Jem’s advantage. Cornelius Kilderbee himself had not been a more staunch and thorough supporter of the young surgeon than Hercules Kingsford, Esquire, of Coote Hall ; and the elder Kingsford’s care for James was chiefly if not altogether due to his nephew.

And now these friends were severed ; but severed under circumstances that would require them to maintain a hollow semblance of their old attachment. At heart they were divided for ever ; at heart they would henceforth regard each other with the sharp enmity of friendship turned sour ; and yet convenience, respect for appearances—on James’s part fidelity towards Bessie, on Herrick’s part an unacknowledged shame of his treason to his old friend—would enjoin them to live together as sociable neighbours, to join

hands at church and market, to witness the growth of familiar intercourse between their wives and children. Perhaps in future days their children would form mutual attachments and intermarry ; but even in that case the fathers would be enemies at heart. At the wedding feast they would pledge each other in wine,—each thinking of an old cynical proverb about the impotence of fair words to butter a mawkish vegetable.

It is not pleasant to be on terms of open and active hostility with any one whom we are compelled to encounter in a casual way once or twice a week. Even those persons who are naturally prone to contention and can draw pleasurable excitement from the heats of altercation will admit that, when the first storm of a squabble has subsided, it is embarrassing to meet the acquaintances whom the dispute has converted into foes. Any man of ordinary temper will allow that, if he must have personal enemies, he would see them as rarely as possible ; would rather that they should not be members of his club, or householders in his street, or daily travellers in the trains or omnibuses by which he is accustomed to run to and fro in the pursuit of his common affairs.

When two old friends have fallen upon each

other's ears and dropped into a state of chronic feud, the virulence and duration of their mutual animosity will depend in a great measure on the proximity of their homes, and the frequency with which they jostle against each other. If they dwell in different quarters of the town—the one, let us say, at Brompton, the other at Stoke Newington; if their professional avocations never bring them in contact, if they have no officious common friends—"mutual friends" as the busy-bodies persist in styling themselves—resolutely set on bringing them together; if, in short, they can only keep out of each other's sight for some four or five years from the date of their rupture, they will most likely meet through pure accident, some balmy summer afternoon, in the gardens of the "Star and Garter," or on a balcony of the "Trafalgar," will join hands over a bottle of Leoville, and having exchanged cigars will return to town in the same brougham, gossiping about old times just as though no hot wind had ever put distance and coldness between them. On the other hand, let them be near neighbours, let them be daily running into each other's paths, let it be manifest to both that interest, comfort, dignity invite them to reconciliation, and they will wax fiercer in their fury till death shall ac-

commodate the difficulty. The hatreds of the British bar seldom lack fervour, but the most rancorous are nursed by rival circuiteers or counsel practising habitually in the same court. The differences that sometimes flush the faces and fire the eyes of great painters would be less obstinate and disastrous if Royal Academicians in a state of war would abstain from showing themselves in Trafalgar-square, and would leave their more pacific brethren to look after the interests of their profession. Of enemies there are many kinds: but of all haters the most ferocious are next-door neighbours at feud.

And of such next-door neighbours the fiercest and most inveterate in hatred are the next-door neighbours of provincial towns. It is terrible to witness the vindictive resoluteness of these members of the human family when they take up the hatchet and start on the war-trail. Gloom comes with the thought that years upon years will pass, that vestries will flourish and die, that rates innumerable will be fought over, raised, and expended ere these belligerents of a Christian parish will cease from strife. This writer speaks of what he knows—of a matter about which readers unfamiliar with country-town life can know but little. He could point to two rival

doctors, brethren in a liberal profession, occupants of houses that literally look into each other's windows as well as upon the market-square of Raydon-on-the-Wold, who have grown grey and rich within thirty yards of each other, and yet have not exchanged words for the last twenty years. He could point to a provincial town with a population of fifteen hundred souls and three solicitors, of which legal force A does not speak with B, who would die rather than enter the doors of C, whose miserable nature puts him at feud with both his professional contemporaries, and wont even let him think well of himself. The writer of this book could point to two brothers, educated and wealthy owners of adjoining farms, who meet in no other house than the parish church, who quarrelled forty years since about the boundary of their contiguous estates, and though the question did not involve a pecuniary interest to the amount of thirty shillings, quarrelled with such fervour and emphasis that spectators soon saw it was a case of war for life. These children of one father and one mother, men of gentle birth, Cambridge culture, ample means, and many amiable qualities, meet each other, stare at each other, look away from each other, scowl at each other daily

in the streets and shops of their native town, but for four times ten years neither of them has given the other the wish of a good-day.

Who can tell the anguish which each of these men has endured in his long indulgence of sullen resentment?

Had James Stapleton, giving utterance to the disdain and anger with which he regarded Herrick's disingenuous conduct, denounced his former friend to his face as a sneak and a trickster, his violence would have had the sympathy of most readers; but even their sympathy with the outbreak of indignation would not have blinded them to its indiscretion. Had James made a clean breast of it to Herrick, and following the fashion of most angry men told him just that "piece of his mind" which was least calculated to gratify the lawyer's self-love, the two men would never have spoken to each other again. But a higher motive than any consideration of interest or convenience endowed James with mastery over his passion.

Whilst he gave Herrick full credit for disinterested love of Bessie Clayton, he could not condone his offences in consideration of the old adage, that a lover's passion justifies every unfairness of which he may be guilty in the pur-

suit of its object. "Since he loved Bessie," James reasoned within himself, "he had as much right as I to try to win her; but in fighting me he dealt me foul blows and wasn't open. He must have fallen in love with her just about the time that he detected my love; Bessie mentioned two years since as the date when he began to show his love for her; and he told me that he detected my concern for her two years since. No doubt his love made him lynx-eyed. Perhaps mine would have made me no less sharp had not the notorious ill-will of his family for Cornelius Kilderbee made it impossible for me to suspect that he would care to marry her. Now, if I had been in his place—I mean, if I had discovered his love just as he detected mine—I would have gone to him and said, 'Jem, we both love the same woman; and I, who would give up my life for you any day, have determined to sacrifice my heart for you; no woman's love shall come between us.' That's what I should have done."

After a pause James doubled his fist, shook his head, and continued his soliloquy. "No, I shouldn't. I should have said no such thing. I shouldn't have spoken so much as a single word about the matter. I should have made the sacrifice in silence, and mentioned it to no

living mortal. That's how I should have treated him. But see how he has treated me! He saw my object at a time when I could have weaned myself from the thought without breaking and rending my heart-strings; he saw me moving onwards slowly and surely to disappointment, but he spoke no word to save me; and towards the close of this false game of his he has been guilty of downright, sheer, unqualified, damnable treachery. When I told him that I intended to make my offer without further delay, he saw that it would be prudent for him to make the most of the time left him, and fix Bessie with a definite offer before her uncle's influence should urge her to accept me. He told me to break the matter to my mother, in the hope that she would oppose me, and that her opposition would give him more time. When my mother had consented, and I was in a humour to go to Bessie, without waiting for quarter-day, he urged me not to be precipitate, so that he might not be tempted to frighten the bird from his own net. Only the other night I told him of the manner in which Mr. Kilderbee had received my proposals, and he shook my hand. The little villain shook my hand, and congratulated me on my certainty of success. The next day I went to the garden,

and found that my friend—this confidential friend to whom I told everything whilst he told me nothing—had been there before me, and had plucked the pear which he told me was sure to be mine. To think that the man, whom I have loved and admired all these years, like the great big hulking fool that I am, should be such a crafty, subtle, false-hearted little rascal! But I wont quarrel with him, I must think for Bessie, and of my promise to her.”

In his reply to the fears which accompanied Bessie’s rejection of his suit, he had said, “As to Herrick, he is my old friend, and when you’re his wife ‘I’ll do him all the good I can, for he’ll be your husband.’”

This was his promise to her. And he was determined to keep it.

CHAPTER XXI.

*For the most part in the Dining-Room of
Coote Hall.*

HERRICK had no need to ask his uncle's consent to his engagement with Cornelius Kilderbee's niece, for the nephew's purpose to win the dissenter's heiress originated in the elder Kingsford's suggestion that when Cornelius Kilderbee should have paid a last farewell to the scenes of his seditious practices Bessie Clayton would be a fit match for any untitled gentleman. The courtly, suave, pompous banker had formed a very flattering opinion of Bessie's beauty and style; and long before the girl had ever dreamt of rising to the social elevation of the Kingsfords, he had intimated to Herrick that in due season she would be a suitable mistress for Coote Hall.

"What would the counties say?" asked Herrick, on receiving this intimation from his uncle, as they sate one Sunday afternoon in the dining-room of Coote Hall, drinking a bottle of '15

port, a vintage already standing high in the esteem of port-wine drinkers.

“That she had forty thousand pounds, and that you were a monstrous lucky fellow.”

“Come, come, sir; you are putting the figure much too high. She wont have anything like so large a pot of money as that.”

“I didn’t say she would, but the counties will. You asked me what the counties would say.”

“True, sir; I did.”

“Then mark me, all the Border will put it at forty thousand.”

“And what do you put it at? She is an uncommonly pretty girl, and though her uncle has been such a boisterous old radical she has been well brought up, and her religious training has been of the right sort. So far so good; but still I am not the man to wish to stoop low and pick up nothing. How much would it be into my pocket?”

“Into the bank,” interposed the uncle, suggesting an amendment of the inquiry, and at the same time expressing with a smile his approval of the judicious and thoroughly sensible tone of his nephew.

“Into the bank,” repeated Herrick, accepting the amendment.

“The welfare of the bank, my boy,” urged the uncle in his kindest and most patriarchal tone, “must always be your first object. So long as Kingsford’s Bank flourishes Coote Hall will flourish. With the bank at your back you may look forward to rising in the county, to representing the borough in Parliament, to holding your own amongst the biggest gentry of the Border. Here, the wine is with you; fill your glass, and let us drink success to Kingsford’s Bank.”

“Now the bank has a sound connexion,” continued Hercules, senior; “it is firm, buoyant, and respected throughout the Border. Kingsford’s notes are as good as Bank of England notes anywhere within twenty miles of Carlton Cross. But with judgment and capital its business may be greatly extended. To succeed a banker must have character and capital. Ah! two fine things—capital and character! So far as character is concerned, Kingsford’s Bank wants nothing; but at all times it would find its advantage in a steady expansion of capital.”

“No doubt,” assented Herrick, concurring with his uncle’s humour. “The junior partner in Kingsford’s Bank is of opinion that capital is never in the way, except when it is out of the way.”

“As the junior partner in Kingsford’s Bank, as the first lawyer of Carlton Cross, as *my heir*,” rejoined the elder Hercules, with rising pomposity, “you might of course marry a young lady of a first-rate family in one of the three counties. But if you married a girl for the sake of her social station, you wouldn’t have capital. The gentry of the Border seldom give their daughters more than four or five thousand pounds; and even that small sum is usually settled—strictly settled in such a fashion that no husband can handle the principal. Now, Cornelius Kilderbee is a twenty thousand pound man at least. I should not be surprised to find that he is a five-and-twenty thousand pound man.”

“Perhaps he’ll leave his money to trustees in trust to build and endow a chapel with it, or to use it for the support of oppressed nationalities, or to expend the income in defending agitators against prosecutions for treasonable practices?”

“He’ll make no such fool of himself,” returned the uncle, settling himself back in his easy chair, and bringing his covetous hands together. “His niece will get every penny of it, with the exception of one or two legacies.”

“You are in his confidence, sir?” inquired

Herrick, obeying a legal instinct, and pressing for the fullest possible information.

Whereupon the elder Hercules Kingsford made a movement which, though it would have impressed a stranger neither deeply nor favourably, quickened perceptibly the attention of the nephew, who knew that it was significant of grave purpose and well meditated craft. First the elder Hercules Kingsford brought into contact the tips of his middle fingers, and then slowly moved his palms towards each other, so that the outer lines of his two hands described an isosceles triangle with an imaginary base. Having constructed his triangle, he slowly raised it, angle upwards, imaginary base downwards, so that it bore palpable resemblance to the first two cards brought into position by the architect of a card-house; and then, with corresponding deliberation, he hung it on the bridge of his nose. The full effect of this pantomime was not felt until the elder Hercules Kingsford proceeded to speak; when his words, on passing from the acutely-peaked roof thus raised over his mouth, had a tone of peculiar confidence and mystery—of which confidence and mystery the influence was heightened by the brightness and diabolical knowingness of the speaker's eyes, burning

luminously in the rear of this singular, but not picturesque gable.

“Herrick,” observed the banker, significantly, when he had thus put himself in position, “I *am* in his confidence, though he has not paid me the compliment of taking me into it. I am in the confidence of some one who is in his confidence. He has mentioned matters in confidence to some one, and that some one has repeated those matters in confidence to me. Somehow things mentioned in confidence are usually repeated in confidence till they are known to everybody whom they concern.” Here the speaker’s eyes winked—the left eye first, and then the right eye, after an interval of two seconds—and two electric currents ran over the knuckles of his bony hands.

“No doubt, sir,” assented the apt pupil. “For my own part I am dead set against the weakness of mentioning anything in confidence. What I wish the world to know I tell the world, and what I don’t wish the world to know I keep to myself.” With respect to which sentiment it may be observed that the Border contained no man more weakly garrulous or incapable of secrecy than Herrick when vanity inspired his tongue.

“ Old Kilderbee has made a will by which he leaves nearly the whole of his money to his niece. Every penny that comes to her will be at her own disposal. Mind, this was mentioned to me in confidence. Whew! a wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse !”

Having given utterance to this rather inappropriate adage, the elder Hercules Kingsford winked again at Herrick, who could not fairly be likened to a blind horse; and forthwith taking the triangle from the bridge of his nose, the senior resumed his ordinary demeanour.

Herrick rose from his chair and walked to the dining-room window, from which point of observation he could get a good view of the garden bright with flowers, of the spire of Coote Church, visible above some elms that shadowed the sacred place, and stood within a hundred yards of the hall door. As the young man passed his eyes over the garden and trees, and the modest park that skirted the house, he ruminated over his uncle's suggestion, thinking how picturesque a mistress Bessie would be for the fair domain of Coote, and what a convenient addition her fortune would prove to the capital of the bank, that had an absolute excess of character.

After a few minutes' meditation the young

man resumed his seat, his glass, and the conversation.

“ ’Pon my honour, uncle, I rather approve your suggestion. I should like my wife ; I should enjoy her money. But whilst I had her without the money, it would sometimes be difficult work to get on pleasantly with my uncle-in-law.”

“ You mayn’t have anything to do with him if you can help it,” promptly rejoined the uncle, who had clearly looked at the matter from every point and under every light.

“ I had rather not.”

“ There’s no hurry. Kilderbee is a struck bird. He’s gouty ; he lives freely, he *always has* lived freely ; he’s over seventy, he was hit deuced hard last spring, and mark my words, Herrick, he wont last long. He may flutter a little longer, but he must drop in the grass if he doesn’t in the turnips.”

The maker of this speech was also a struck bird. He was gouty ; he lived freely, he always had lived freely ; he was over seventy, and he had been hit deuced hard last spring. Perhaps the western light streaming athwart the upper end of the room put him in mind of the elms and church spire over which it had come on its

way to the dining-room window, and suggested the thought that life could not be much longer for Hercules Kingsford of Coote Hall than for Cornelius Kilderbee of Green Villa; that the same awful calm would soon possess the Tory magistrate and the Radical tradesman — the churchman and the dissenter. If so, the light influenced his brain more than his heart, for, after a pause, he continued with characteristic decision and levity. “So am I. All that I say of him he can say of me. We are both on our last flight, but I shall fly the furthest, or my name isn’t Kingsford. If he drops in the turnips, I shall drop in the grass; if he drops in the grass, old Hercules of Coote Hall will flutter on to the next piece.”

“Then you’d have me temporize and dally about Miss Bessie, and do nothing more? Eh, sir?” inquired Herrick, who had too much good taste to follow his uncle in the track of thought opened up by his two last speeches.

The look of wariness, craft, malevolent know- ingness suddenly returned to the elder Kingsford’s face with such force that it was strange he did not repeat the piece of pantomime that usually accompanied the expression. For a moment he seemed about to reconstruct his gable and hang

it on the bridge of his nose ; but he thought better of it, and employed his hands more suitably in filling his glass and passing the decanter.

“ If you would carry out this scheme, Herrick,” the master of Coote Hall responded slowly, “ and I must own there are several reasons that make me like the scheme, you must play a cautious game. You should have such an understanding with the girl as would block out every other man from a chance of winning her off-hand. But you should try to keep her in hand without making her an offer till old Kilderbee drops. Moreover, if you can manage it, you should keep the old man in the dark, and not let him suspect your little game. Make love to the girl, but stop short of a declaration that would necessitate a revelation of the affair to her uncle ; and be very civil to the uncle, so that, if you should have to hurry matters more than you wish, he may have learnt to tolerate you.”

“ Tolerate me ? Well, I do not suppose he bears me any great love.”

“ Herrick,” answered the elder Hercules, not loudly but with vehemence and quickness, “ he hates me like poison ; and I look down on him as a fellow who ought even now to be put out to cool in the parish stocks, and then receive a

round dozen from the borough beadle ! Years ago I did my best to beggar that man, but the fellow has grown rich in spite of me ; he is a monstrous clever tradesman, his wine is the best wine that can be bought in the Border. I don't say that he doesn't deserve his success, but I do grudge him his riches, and it would be a comfort to me to know that what he has amassed to my annoyance will pass into the hands of my heir, and help to keep up the Kingsford name in this nook of the three counties. Beware of *him*. He's a sly dog ; and every kick I have given him he has repaid with a bite."

This conversation occurred something more than two years before the date of James Stapleton's offer to Bessie ; and its consequences were that Hercules Kingsford, Esquire, of Coote Hall, neglected no opportunity of displaying civility to Cornelius Kilderbee, who accepted the banker's complaisance and blandishments as transparent endeavours to patronize the opponent whom the Brothers Kingsford had formerly endeavoured to crush ; that Herrick, following his uncle's example, adopted at borough meetings a tone of respectful admiration for the veteran reformer with whose opinions he unfortunately could not agree, although he revered the sincerity of his

convictions and purpose; and that this same Hercules Kingsford the younger lost no time in carrying out his uncle's judicious instructions with respect to Bessie Clayton, whom he adroitly inveigled into a sentimental entanglement of such a kind that, whilst it gave him all the power over her which a definite exchange of promises would have given him, it closed her mouth to her uncle, placed her lover under no necessity to communicate his passion to her guardian, and even left him free to withdraw from the affair or carry it out according to his pleasure.

For the greater part of two years he had held Bessie's heart in his keeping, and yet at any point of that time if he had discontinued his intercourse with her, no person in Carlton Cross, save himself and Bessie, would have known his baseness, and even she would have found it difficult to prove to the satisfaction of any third person that he had done more than trifle with her in a flirtation to which she had attached more significance than he had wished or was aware of.

He caused her to understand that he had conceived for her a deep and enduring affection, which he was restrained from putting in explicit terms through fear that his declaration would

necessitate an appeal to her uncle, and thereby raise an insuperable obstacle to the attainment of his desire. Fully alive to the vehemence of her uncle's detestation of the Kingsfords, the girl was neither slow to accept this view of her lover's position nor inclined to underrate the reasonableness of his apprehension. The alternations of hope and fear which she experienced during this private though not exactly clandestine intercourse with her cautious suitor were indicated by the terms in which she described it to James Stapleton. At one time she feared that her fancy must have played her false and induced her to exaggerate the force of his well-chosen words; at another she was confident he was hers at heart no less than she was his. Throughout this period of peculiar trial to the girl, Herrick controlled the game so skilfully, that when at length his offer had been made and accepted, she was exactly truthful in saying of their mutual hope, "Our secret has been our own, that is, *mine has been mine and his his.*" Even when she was most hopeful that she would one day be his wife, she had placed that "one day" far off in the distant future, when benignant circumstances should have mitigated her uncle's aversion to Herrick's name and stock, or *time*—her affec-

tionate heart never allowed her even to think of it as "death"—should have made her free to select her husband without reference to an uncle's will.

At the last Herrick did not commit himself by a definite proposal until he had made his uncle aware of James Stapleton's intentions, and taken the banker's opinion on the case in its latest phase.

"It's touchy work," responded the veteran, "playing for the trick when the trick decides the game. You can't be certain that the girl is yours as you haven't proposed to her outright. She may have a suspicion that you have been trifling with her, in which case, if James Stapleton, backed up by the old man, should push her hard, she may yield, and take him upon the strength of 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.' And then the old man's twenty thousand wont come to Kingsford's Bank. On the other hand, if you offer and she accepts you, it is likely enough that old Kilderbee, foiled in his purpose, will refuse his consent to your marriage."

"She can marry me without it," observed Herrick, with a touch of lover's ardour.

"And old Kilderbee can alter his will without

her consent," rejoined the elder Hercules, with a rattle in his voice.

"That's true."

"But," continued the elder, decisively, "you must nail her and hope to do your best with the old man. If he should show fight and threaten to cut her off with a shilling in case she married you, there will be time enough then to throw her over."

"By Jove, sir!" exclaimed Herrick, who really had a sense of honour, though a blunt one, and in a certain way some sentimental fondness for the woman whom for upwards of two years he had regarded as his future wife, "I couldn't do that, and what's more, you wouldn't have me. If she says 'yes,' I shall be bound to stick to her. I couldn't throw her over after she had accepted me."

"Couldn't you?" returned Hercules, senior, with a slight sneer on his lip and a corresponding snarl in his voice. "No man knows what he can do until he tries. Anyhow, you could behave like a man and decline to make your own happiness a cause of estrangement between a devoted niece and a loving uncle? Eh? But there is no reason to talk now about what you could or couldn't do under circumstances that may

never happen. What you can and what you must do just now is plain enough: you must make your offer. You must play your last card, and hope neither of your adversaries has a higher."

So Herrick, like a dutiful nephew and loyal lover, made his offer with a result already known to readers.

CHAPTER XXII.

Wherein Herrick asks for his old Friend's Hand.

JAMES STAPLETON was sitting in his consulting-room, keeping company with gloomy thoughts, just thirty hours after his rejection, when a familiar step and tap on the outer side of the door made him shiver and hastily withdraw his eyes from the point where his unwelcome and yet unavoidable visitor would enter the room. Another twenty seconds, and raising his eyes from the ground he looked into Herrick's face for the first time since their friendship had turned to bitterness. The surgeon's lamp, throwing a full light on Herrick but leaving its owner in deep shadow, enabled James to study the intruder's countenance without exposing himself to a similar scrutiny.

"It's late, old fellow," began Herrick, with the habitual familiarity which had never before caused James aught save pleasure, "but I could not let another night pass without dropping in upon you. I hope I am welcome?"

“ I expected you, and didn’t close my door,” returned James, keeping his seat whilst he examined the face of his old friend who stood before him, making a painful and imperfectly-successful effort to maintain an unabashed front.

“ You see, Jem, this first interview after recent occurrences to which we will make no unnecessary allusions is to a certain degree embarrassing, not to say painful to both of us. How should it be otherwise? I am sure I never expected to feel such a sense of discomfort on crossing your threshold; but still when I saw it was my duty to make the first advances, and all that sort of thing, why I put all thought for myself out of consideration, and—and—here I am.”

Herrick’s countenance, as he uttered these last words, gave the suitable addition—“ and on my honour I almost wish I wasn’t.”

Nor was his discomfort diminished when James observed bluntly, “ Yes, I can understand your feelings, and I’ll go so far as to say that I don’t envy them. But you needn’t fear that I shall insult you now that you are within my own doors, or indeed when we meet elsewhere. Take a chair.”

“ First take my hand, Jem,” rejoined Herrick, suiting his action to his word, “ and say that it

is all right between us. Of course I can't expect you to congratulate me on my engagement, and I can't say that my conscience is altogether easy concerning my behaviour to you in the matter. You have good ground of complaint against me; but there's more to be said in my defence than you are aware. And even if I were as black as I seem to you, why you are big enough fellow to act a generous part."

"You shan't have any reason to complain of my want of generosity! But take a chair, and let us have a few words before we join hands."

Thus pressed, Herrick yielded the point, taking the seat to which James pointed, and as he did so feeling that his old friend had fairly passed out of his control.

"You see," he urged, "everything is fair in love."

"But not in friendship."

"The greater includes the less."

"We had better pull up at once, Kingsford, and bid each other good night, than drift into the talk of novel-writers. Let's talk like men with a painful matter in hand."

"We both loved her," resumed Herrick, changing his tone, and thereby indicating that he had overcome his transient inclination to fence with words.

“I can speak for myself—go on.”

“But she is only one woman, and it was impossible for both of us to win her.”

“No doubt; anyhow one was doomed to disappointment.”

“The matter is painful and cruel to both of us—painful and cruel to *me*, though I am the fortunate suitor. However much a man may value his friend, it is in nature that he should prize his mistress more; but he is to be commiserated if he wins the latter at the risk of losing the former. It is more than two years since I fell in love with Bessie; perhaps you charge me with want of frankness in keeping the matter secret from you?”

“I make no such charge—how could I? I who loved Miss Clayton four times as long, and yet gave you no sign?”

“Ah, it’s a pity you didn’t!” urged Herrick, with a sudden twist of thought, and a note of pathetic persuasiveness.

“Would that have made any difference?”

“Why, Jem,” returned Herrick, with the genuine but shallow emotion of that most dangerous of all humbugs—the humbug whose eyes are blinded to his own hypocrisy, whose conscience can endorse the falsehoods of his

lips, whose insincerity is so much more an affair of impulse than of design that he is most inclined to credit himself with honesty and fine feelings when he is most busy in deceiving others—"if you had only told me all your wish before I had gone so far that her happiness required me to go further, I would have cried back and left the sport to you. But it was only the other night that I learnt your secret for the first time. If you had only been as communicative twelve months earlier—ay, if I had even so much as a suspicion of your wishes twelve months earlier—I should never have made Bessie an offer."

As he gave utterance to this romantic speech Herrick's eyes flashed, and his cheeks grew bright with colour, so that they accorded with the generous part which he imagined himself capable of playing, under circumstances that, notwithstanding his words spoken on a former occasion, had not actually occurred.

"Tut!—tut! this is child's play, or worse," James Stapleton retorted hastily. "You told me that you discovered my secret two years since. You forget, Kingsford—you forget."

Herrick's face grew much brighter when he was thus reminded of "the falsehood into which"—

as an earlier chapter of this story says—"he had been betrayed by vanity and cunning—a falsehood which he bitterly repented when, after the lapse of a few days, he reflected on the occurrences of the evening."

For a minute James left his old schoolfellow to taste in silence the full flavour of his humiliation; and then he resumed speech to this effect—

"We had better say as little as possible about this matter now; and on future occasions we had better say nothing. You have won the woman whom I wished to make my wife; you had a right to win her, and I don't quarrel with you about that. You have not treated me well—you have not given me such treatment as I have ever given you; but I don't mean to quarrel with you on that account. We have been open friends, and I have no wish that we should be open enemies. For Bessie's sake—I mean, for Miss Clayton's sake—I shall soon cure myself of calling her Bessie—I wish you happiness, and I'll do my best to promote it; and since it will be more or less her happiness, I shall thank God if your happiness has no drawback. I can't say more. You ask me to give you my hand; here, Kingsford, take it as the hand of a man who will

never do you ill, or wish you evil, or neglect an opportunity to serve you.”

“It’s the hand of a true friend,” ejaculated Herrick, as he grasped the hand.

“Of a man who will always behave as though he were your true friend,” returned James with strict truthfulness. After a few seconds’ pause he added, abruptly—“And now, Kingsford, let us say good night. I want to be alone.”

Having thus dismissed his visitor with scant courtesy, and found himself once again alone, James Stapleton murmured—“The scales have dropt from my eyes. Is it possible that my chosen friend, my heroic friend, is that paltry fellow? Why, he is a sneak and a humbug; and what’s more, he told me a lie. Oh, Bessie, Bessie! I wish for your sake that he was less unworthy of you.”

Herrick also made his reflections on the interview.


“Well, that’s over, and that’s something to be able to say about a painful business. Anyhow, he has shaken hands with me, and there will be no open rupture of our friendship. And I must own that, though I carry many more guns than ‘dear old Jem,’ and belong to a higher grade of the social system, and stand in no need of his

countenance, it would have been very awkward and embarrassing if he had quarrelled with me. Since we must be neighbours, it would be awkward to both of us to be at feud. Upon the whole he behaved very well, considering how hard I hit him. Of course he was cold and distant—called me Kingsford instead of Herrick, a thing he never did before in all his life—but he'll soon come round like a sensible fellow who, even now that his chagrin and annoyance are most acute, sees that it would not be to his interest to quarrel with good patients and useful friends. Ha! ha! 'dear old Jem' knows which is the buttered side of his bread as well as any man in the Border, and he wont be such a fool as to quarrel with Coote Hall."

In this generous way Herrick reflected on the interview as he retired to rest; but sleep was driven from his pillow for more than one long hour by disagreeably vivid recollections of the novel sense of powerlessness and insignificance and meanness which he had experienced whilst enduring the gaze of his incensed and injured friend.

CHAPTER XXIII.

*A Notable Project on the part of Cornelius
Kilderbee.*

HEN James Stapleton paid his next visit to Green Villa forty-eight hours had elapsed since his rejection by Bessie, during which time Cornelius Kilderbee had so far accommodated his mind to the new position of affairs that he had invited James to an interview in order that they might take counsel together over their griefs, and reconcile themselves to misfortune which they could not control.

“I was thinking—I was thinking,” said the veteran, rousing himself from a reverie which James’s entrance had disturbed rather than broken.

“So I saw, and your thoughts are running away with you again,” observed James, who had occupied his customary chair in Cornelius Kilderbee’s parlour for five minutes without hearing as many words from the merchant’s lips.

“I was thinking,” resumed the merchant on receiving this hint that he ought to discharge the

functions of an entertainer, “ of my past and your present, of the sorrow from which I fled to settle in this town, and the sorrow that has all of a sudden fallen on you ; and the similitude of our cases set me pondering on how one generation resembles another even in the minutest particulars—how in their failing years the old see the joys and pains of their young days so exactly reproduced in the life of the young—that it almost seems to us old people for minutes together as though we were once again in the spring of our days and regarding ourselves in a mirror. There’s no new thing under the sun, James Stapleton ; and of all the things on which God pours his light, human life, so far as the affections are concerned, is just about the thing in which there’s least novelty. What I groaned under fifty years syne you are groaning under now ; and what you groan under to-day, the offspring of your loins will groan under when your bones lie in the cloister yonder, side by side with the bones of men and women who have rejoiced and suffered and toiled and perished from the earth before us. This life is like the ocean, in the commotion and riot of its labour always giving promise of something new—a promise never fulfilled by the mighty waves that have no sooner

raised the hope of credulous watchers than they fall back into the depths in the old deceptive fashion and with the old unchanging music. Poets have told us this again and again ; but no man really sees the truth of the simile until the grief of his own heart reveals it to him."

" It's a truth that consoles rather than disheartens, Mr. Kilderbee."

" Consoles ! Why, lad, it's nature's great song of comfort ; even its saddest notes plant in us the seeds of gladness whilst they call up the tears with which such seeds must be watered if we would have them yield flower and fruit."

" You are talking to no rebel against destiny," rejoined James, with a smile that did more than his words to bring Bessie to her uncle's mind. " I have made up my mind to bear my lot with philosophic submissiveness."

" That's right, James ! You must bear it ; and it's better to grin than to cry over what one can't like but must endure. There's no man better qualified to give you advice here than I."

After a pause, the speaker, with a startling change of voice, continued : " It will surprise you to know that Bessie is no niece of mine, has no drop of my blood in her veins."

" Not your niece ?"

“When I was a youngster, just about to enter business in my native city, I made an offer to a girl who refused me just as Bessie refused you the other day, saying that another man blocked the way to her heart. I was a green, tender boy then, and was sore troubled by the mishap. Had I continued to live in the old town, her husband would have been my neighbour; every day of my life I should have witnessed his happiness, and should never have seen a smile on his face without thinking it a smile of derisive triumph over his wife’s disappointed suitor. The thought of being compelled to endure such annoyance was too much for me; and rather than bear it I quitted the city of my birth and my forbears, not a little to my worldly detriment, and came out here. Well, time went on. My old love had a merry life for some twenty years with her rich husband, when she died, leaving five children; and ten years afterwards, when her children had all floated off into the world, my rival died a much poorer man than his neighbours had fancied him. So my love and her husband had played out their game and passed away before I would even allow to myself that I was beginning to wear towards old age. For years before her death I had really scarce given

her a thought ; but the news that she had gone away wakened up old memories and made me tremble at the discovery that I had never got the complete mastery of my love of her. As for her husband, I never, never knew how I hated him until I caught myself gloating over the passage in the newspaper that told me he was dead. This is how we old men look back on the companions of our youth."

" And Bessie ?"

" My old love died when the fortunes of her husband and children were at their brightest. There seemed to be a curse on the young people ; one after another they dropped beneath the surface after floating out into the open sea. Two of them, young men, died childless within two years of their father's death ; the daughters all married and died within a few years of each other. The youngest of the family, a girl who became the wife of a poor Northamptonshire curate, was the gentlest and most wretched of them all. She was very like her mother, and her only child is the only surviving offspring of this family of five children—of the woman who was fool enough to love a richer man than myself."

" Of course Bessie's father is dead ?"

" Died before her mother, who was in the most

deplorable straits when I quite accidentally heard of her—heard that she was at death's door and in extreme poverty. I found the poor thing with her little girl in dirty lodgings, this child of the only woman I ever had the heart to love. Well, I did what I could for her—I buried her. That was just about all that was left for me to do. And when I had put her to rest, I brought the child to Carlton Cross. There's the history of my niece. After all she is not of my blood."

A note of menace that faintly qualified the tone in which these last words were uttered caused James Stapleton to interpose, "But she is of your heart."

"No doubt. What then?"

"You wont oppose her wish to marry Kingsford?"

"Kingsford! Why don't you call him Herrick?" retorted the veteran, quickly; and pouring forth a bitter laugh he continued: "You took me to task the other night for calling him a self-satisfied upstart and a white-livered sneak. You told me that 'Herrick,' your *dear friend Herrick*, was as honest and true a fellow as could be found in the whole Border. What do you say about him now?"

“ You may not have been unjust to Kingsford, sir,” returned James with emotion, “ but you are not thoughtful for me. He does me no kindness who aggravates my ill will towards Kingsford with bitter words.”

“ You are right there, lad, and Cornel Kilderbee begs your pardon. But let us think of her, poor mortal. She has chosen the cockatoo when she might have mated with the eagle ; and unless I am much mistaken, she’ll find the cockatoo’s cage a worse home than the eagle’s eyry. But the poor soul must have her own way. You might as well hope to stay the ugly rush of a mad bull with fair words as try to check a woman in love by force of sober argument. She must ‘ gang her ain gait,’ as the Scotch say ; and since it is so, she may as well choose her own time for starting ; and if she is bound on a sad journey, the more reason that we send her on the way with smiles and kind words. So we’ll just make an effort to swallow our physic as though we relished it like wine. We’ll marry her off with a gallant show, making the world believe we’re right proud of the match, and saying no word that may be an arrow in her heart when she has grown a wiser and sadder woman.”

“ Sir, I am cordially glad that you take the

matter in this way," ejaculated James, with a feeling of sudden relief from anxious fear.

"But," continued Cornel Kilderbee, flushing angrily, and pausing in his utterance until he had raised his poker and delivered a vicious blow on the topmost coal of the blazing fire that roared beneath his parlour chimney, "my money is my own, and I am not necessitated to make it over to the miserable popinjay that is to be her husband. My money was made in honest trade, by industry and vigilance and self-denial and liberal dealing; and money so gathered wouldn't mingle well with money made by usury and sharp practice, and downright fraud and damnable overbearing insolence. Do you suppose that old Cornel Kilderbee has worked hard, and made a small fortune, only that he may enrich the family that tried to crush him when he was poor? James Stapleton," the old man continued, with energy, striking his gouty hands on his lean thighs, "the Kingsfords are my enemies; as a Christian, with one foot in the grave, I forgive them all the harm they've done me, but I am not going to give them my money as well as my forgiveness."

"Good heavens, sir!" exclaimed James, all his worst fears suddenly returning; "you don't

surely mean that you will cut Bessie off with a shilling?"

"No, no, my lad," returned the veteran, with a chuckle that contrasted painfully with the caustic dryness of the tone in which the subsequent words were spoken; "she shall have a handsome shilling and something over, to satisfy her that I bore her no enmity, and the rest of my money shall go elsewhere. I'll do the liberal thing by the poor child in my last will and testament. Maybe I'll leave her a mourning ring, and settle an annuity of a hundred pounds on her babes; but as for the residue of my estate — as for that" (here the speaker suddenly changed his voice to a sharp note as he abruptly turned his bright gaze into James's eyes), "what would you say if you found that I had left it to you?—eh, my lad, what would you say?"

So totally unprepared was James for this suggestion that he could not command words for a reply until his companion had renewed speech to the following effect—

"She'll have money enough, and to spare, for your dear friend Herrick will be a rich man with his law business and his bank and his uncle's savings. What need could the wife of so rich a man ever have for the paltry glean-

ings of a trumpery little tradesman like Cornel Kilderbee? So in judging of this scheme of mine you needn't think about her. Think of yourself, Jemmy, and say, wouldn't it be a little consolation to you, when you turn away from my grave, to be able to speak in this fashion to your *dear friend Herrick*—'For the sake of her fortune you thieved from me the woman with whom you knew me to be in love—ay, knew it ere ever you thought about winning her; but though you stole the girl, it's I who have her money?' Come, lad, wouldn't it be a sweet revenge to have it in your power to say that to your dear friend Herrick?"

Thirty seconds passed ere James could say—
"I want no vengeance on Kingsford—at least, no such vengeance as you suggest. There's a devil in my blood just now, and you have done me no kindness in provoking it. In time that devil will die out of me—my constitution will eject it and outlive it; but even now that the poison is in me, I can say honestly that the wish for vengeance on Bessie's husband will never be wish of mine. As for your proposal, if you were to carry it out I should regard your will as the greatest calamity of my life, and its effect would be that I could no longer endure

to live in this town. It would create bitterness between Bessie and her husband—bitterness and discord which she would naturally attribute to me, and of which I should in a certain sense be the original cause. You must know little of me, Mr. Kilderbee, if you imagine that I should enjoy a triumph purchased at the price of her happiness. Your money, if it came to me on such terms,—I would not, I could not touch a penny of it.”

The strongest powers of James Stapleton’s magnetic eyes, the peculiar expressiveness of his remarkable voice, gave these words a significance and force that cannot be imparted to the cold and silent characters of printed language ; and as the old merchant listened he saw the meanness and badness of the project for which, in a moment of anger and moral blindness, he had confidently sought the sanction of James’s approval. To his credit it may be recorded, that no sooner was he aware of his error than he relinquished the scheme of vengeance in which the surgeon had declined to be a participator ; but instead of signifying in express terms his sudden revulsion of sentiment and change of purpose, he confined himself to a characteristic expression of pity for his adopted

child, and of admiration for her rejected lover.

“Oh, Jemmy, Jemmy!” cried the old man, in a key that indicated extreme agitation, as he clutched his friend’s broad hand, “what a little fool she is!—what a little fool she is! She is as much like all her sex as you are unlike yours. To think of it, that she—the winsomest and daintiest and best girl in all the Border—should have taken up with that pert, mealy-mouthed, bumptious whipper-snapper when she might have had you! There, there, lad, let’s have a pipe and talk politics. Anyhow, we’ve got the Bill. By the Lord, my heart would break in my old breast if it was not held together and plastered round by the Reform Bill.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

Terms of Capitulation.

HAVING decided to give his consent to Bessie's engagement, Cornelius Kilderbee lost no time in acting upon his decision ; and having so far reconciled himself to the unacceptable match, he now came to the opinion that the wedding could not take place too soon. To long engagements he was strongly opposed ; and the circumstances of Bessie's espousal by no means inclined him to regard it as an occasion for modifying the views which he was known to hold on an interesting social question. Until the marriage should be solemnized it would almost daily devolve on him to play the part of host to Herrick Kingsford, a task to which the old man looked forward with lively repugnance. Again, so long as Herrick should be a frequent visitor in Green Villa, for the avowed purpose of offering to Bessie the attentions of an accepted lover, it was not to be expected that James Stapleton would spend much

time in the same house. To free himself from the obligation to show Herrick civility, and secure himself the renewal of James's familiar visits, Mr. Kilderbee would gladly have married the lovers with indecorous expedition. Moreover, the irritability of his constitution helped to make him eager to do at once what he would fain have avoided the necessity for doing at all. "Since I must put myself under the surgeon's knife," he observed to James, "I would rather be operated on now than six months hence; delay would not lessen the pain of the operation, and in the meantime my imagination would be magnifying the torture and peril. When a child has to take a dose of nasty physic, the sooner he swallows it the better for himself as well as for the nurse and the doctor."

So after consultation with Bessie and Herrick, the master of Green Villa decided to swallow the appointed dose of nasty physic on the first day of December, thereby arranging that the period of betrothal should be as short as the public opinion of the borough would permit him to make it, but still giving the young people sufficient time for necessary preparations.

This brief though sufficient time was productive of unusual excitement to the principal in-

habitants of the Border, and imparted noticeable agitation to the elder Hercules Kingsford, of Kingsford's Bank and Coote Hall, whose enthusiastic expressions of pleasure at the proposed alliance of his heir with the fair and accomplished niece of his old and much respected neighbour, accorded ill with his secret chagrin at the complete failure of his attempts to induce the old and much respected neighbour to endow his fair and accomplished niece with a portion of his wealth. To gain his point, the elder Hercules had recourse successively to hints, suggestions, expostulations, threats. But all to no purpose did he strive to wring satisfactory terms from the enemy. To initiatory hints that so wealthy an uncle would of course exhibit his characteristic munificence to the young lady who so fully deserved her guardian's affection, Cornelius Kilderbee bluntly answered that munificence never had been and never should be one of his characteristics. Suggestions and expostulations were met with the same unconciliatory frankness. It was not till he had tried in vain every reasonable means for the attainment of his object that Hercules the elder had recourse to menace, enveloped in those verbal suavities of which the Kingsfords were natural masters, and

dexterously conveyed in language that would not necessitate a rupture with the retired merchant. But to an involved and cautious statement of what course Mr. Kingsford of Coote Hall under certain circumstances might deem himself compelled to take, however much he should regret and deplore the inevitable consequences of such action, Cornelius Kilderbee replied with a crushing candour that left the banker nothing save a choice between two forms of defeat.

“ I quite understand your words, Mr. Kingsford,” replied the patriarch of the Border radicals, looking his old enemy full in the face, “ and in the sincere hope that you may put their menace in effect I make you a plain answer. Nothing, sir, would please me more than that this marriage on which my little girl, Heaven bless her, has set her heart, should not eventuate. I like your nephew as little as I like you ; and when I say that, you can need no further assurance that I would use any fair means to keep my niece from his hands. If you ordered your nephew to withdraw from this engagement, he would, I doubt not, justify my low opinion of him by obeying your command, that is, the command of self-interest. In which case Bessie, having seen his character fairly put before her, would soon get

the better of her infatuation and receive the offer of a more worthy man. So unacceptable is this marriage to me, that I don't exaggerate my repugnance to it when I say that it will under any circumstances be the great sorrow of my closing years. Then, sir, if I must submit to it, the terms of submission must be mine not yours. When I die my money will go to the girl and her children; she has been reared as my niece and heiress, and she has done nothing that would justify me in disappointing the expectations which I have encouraged her to form. It will embitter my last days to think that the wealth, the moderate wealth, which I have accumulated, must go to enrich, directly or indirectly, any member of your family. But however unpleasant this prospect may be, I'll be true to her. When I am dead she shall have my money; but if your nephew marries my niece, he must take her without a penny beyond her wedding outfit, which shall be in accordance with her station. During my life I don't mean to strip myself for the gratification of him or any other Kingsford. During my life he must be my obsequious and dutiful nephew, paying court to me in anticipation of my posthumous favours; but while the breath remains in my body he shall not exult at

having clutched so much as one of the thousands for the sake of which he has paid me the compliment of winning my niece's heart without my permission."

This long speech was uttered with aggravating slowness ; and as the elder Kingsford received the full significance of its contemptuous insults, his eyes flashed with anger, and he was on the point of declaring that his heir should withdraw from a negotiation which could not conduce to his honour, and might result in material disadvantage to him. But the wary banker, by a timely effort, smothered his rage, and closed the interview with an announcement that he would not deliver an answer to Mr. Kilderbee's ultimatum until he had turned the matter over in his mind. And after deliberation with Herrick, the master of Coote Hall saw reason to congratulate himself on his self-control.

There was satisfaction for him in the reflection that Cornelius Kilderbee—a man so exactly truthful that his word was as good as his bond throughout the Border counties—had expressly stated that, notwithstanding his displeasure with her choice of a lover, Bessie and her children should be the possessors of his wealth. "Fellows of his sort take a pride in fulfilling their engage-

ments to the letter," pondered the banker. "She'll have his money ; for he has passed his word for it." It was also delightful to him to recall the dissenter's insolent avowal of distaste for the proposed marriage. "The old man writhes under the thought that the Kingsfords are going to swallow his money as well as his niece," argued the banker, as he drank his daily allowance of port. Moreover, the elder Kingsford was aware that so far as a true Kingsford was capable of genuine love, Herrick had conceived a strong affection for the girl whom he originally wooed at the suggestion of self-interest. It even occurred to the banker that matters had gone so far with his nephew and Miss Clayton that, notwithstanding the reasonableness and apparent justice of Cornelius Kilderbee's disdainful estimate of Herrick's readiness to obey his uncle in all things, the engagement was a matter on which the young man would have a will of his own.

So Hercules Kingsford of Coote Hall accepted Cornelius Kilderbee's terms ; and Border society was informed that the wedding would be celebrated without delay.

And to those who were not behind the scenes—that is to say, to the entire population of the Border with the exception of some half-dozen

persons—it seemed that the engagement was an affair for congratulation to all who were immediately affected by it. Whilst the master of Coote Hall overflowed with protestations of delight at the prospect of his nephew's settlement, Cornelius Kilderbee's affectionate care for Bessie restrained him from expressing to the world his aversion for the alliance. Indeed, the arrangement was so universally regarded as a social preferment to the dissenter's niece, that few persons paused to debate whether the match was altogether to the merchant's mind; and the coldness with which he responded to his neighbours' rather riotous congratulations was construed as the affectation of a man who, after a life spent in the advocacy of republican sentiments, had not enough hardihood to acknowledge the pleasure which his niece's elevation occasioned him. Upon the whole, the announcement was favourably received in every section of Border society. In the borough, Bessie's popularity made her advancement acceptable to all classes, even to the dissenters, who would have felt themselves injured by her union with a churchman had she been educated in nonconformist principles. A few shrewd gossips there were perhaps who, having assigned her to James Stapleton, whispered amongst themselves

that it was to be hoped Miss Clayton knew what was for her own happiness, and had not sacrificed her own peace of mind, or the mental peace of any other person, to vain ambition. But these critics were so few and obscure, that their hints and surmises had no perceptible influence on the public opinion of the town. Nor were the Border gentry less unanimous in their approval, although Herrick's removal from the list of eligible and unattached bachelors of the district might have been effected in a manner more agreeable to the hopes of Lady Herriss of Heathfield Hall, who, having five portionless daughters on her hands, had on more than one occasion been at considerable pains to evince her goodwill to Hercules Kingsford's nephew.

CHAPTER XXV.

“The Quality” call at Green Villa.



VERY different to Bessie and James were the weeks that intervened between the engagement and marriage of the former.

To her they were a period of cloudless joy and intense exultation, as the period of engagement naturally is to every girl who, after many vicissitudes of fear and hope, finds herself on the eve of marriage with the man whom she loves with the full ardour of an affectionate nature. Hers was not a mind to analyse its own happiness ; but if she had resolved her delight into its elements she would not have blushed to own that the worldly advantages of the alliance contributed in no inconsiderable degree to her satisfaction with her own bright fortune. So far as her estimate of these advantages was concerned, simplicity and native modesty effected that which would have been the result of worldliness and selfish calculation in a less artless and unambitious girl. Little given though she was to

value and compare the external circumstances of her neighbours, she could not be insensible to the superiority of her lover's social condition to that of her uncle's familiar friends. Though she had never given it serious thought at any earlier period, her affection for Herrick had often thrust it upon her consideration during the two last years, inspiring her at moments of despondency with a vague fear that it might prove the one insuperable obstacle to her happiness, and as often causing her to rebuke herself for presumption in aspiring to one who was placed so manifestly above her.

Women, even of the simplest kind, are quick to detect, and prone to rate at their full worth, the minute gradations of social rank ; and Bessie, who apart from her more than ordinary grace and truthfulness, and sweetness of temper, was a type of commonplace womankind, would under any circumstances have fully appreciated the pre-eminence which the Kingsfords had achieved amongst the gentry of the borough, although it could under no circumstances have influenced her affection for Herrick. But now that he was hers, it gave her pleasure to magnify every item of his importance, and contrast the height of his degree with her own lowliness. What was there

in her, she asked her grateful and guileless heart, that could account for her good fortune in winning the heart of the superb Mr. Herrick Kingsford, who might have chosen his bride from Heathfield Hall?

Indeed, there were moments during her engagement when this alliance of love and gratitude, and lowliness and exultation, almost made a snob of the young lady who, hitherto healthfully indifferent to the opinions of people with whom she never came in close contact, now began to doubt her fitness for the high estate to which she was about to be raised, and even to trouble her little brain as to the reception which would be accorded to her as Herrick's bride by the wives and daughters of the neighbouring magnates. On this score, however, her mind was soon put at ease by Herrick, who prevailed on some of the more august of these great ladies to call at Green Villa, and make her acquaintance whilst she still remained beneath the roof of her nonconforming uncle. And truth to tell, Herrick had no great difficulty in winning this countenance for his future bride; for various considerations concurred to dispose the local gentry to give Bessie a cordial reception. Ere long Herrick would be the banker of the district, and already

as his uncle's partner he was a personage whom some of the less opulent members of the Border quality were more anxious to conciliate than ready to offend. By some heads of families it was prudently argued that since Miss Clayton would in brief time be the mistress of Coote Hall and a power in the neighbourhood, it would be to the interest of their young people that they should lose no time in welcoming the dissenter's niece to their set.

Lady Herriss of Heathfield Hall—who, notwithstanding her straitened means, was highly influential in Border society, and who had moreover special reasons for wishing to conceal the chagrin which she secretly felt at Herrick's engagement—actually drove over to Coote and suggested to Hercules Kingsford the senior that she should leave cards on Miss Clayton. Nor was that worthy old soldier, Sir John Heneage, baronet and Tory member for the borough, less prompt in making friendly overtures to Green Villa. “She's an uncommonly pleasant young lady, and has been bred up a churchwoman, and everybody speaks favourably of her,” observed this member of the electoral chamber to his better if not his wiser half—“and what's more to the purpose, the Kingsfords are my staunch sup-

porters in the borough. So, my dear, as this is a nice bright morning for a drive, go over to Carlton Cross and do the civil thing." Obeying orders like a good wife and zealous political coadjutor, Lady Heneage started on her mission with the intention of calling on the new inmates of Carlton Cross rectory before she bore down upon the stronghold of radical opinion; and as luck would have it, the first person whom she encountered in Lady Bertie Godsall's drawing-room was Miss Clayton, who had so thoroughly gained Lady Bertie's good favour that on her return to Boxmere House Lady Heneage reported to her husband that Lady Bertie and Miss Clayton were as thick as two peas.

Whilst these attentions greatly delighted and to some degree bewildered the young lady to whom they were specially rendered, Cornelius Kilderbee accepted his incidental share in them with outward composure and secret satisfaction. He was greatly surprised by the courteous demonstrations of persons whom he was accustomed to classify with significant asperity as "bigwigs;" and if his surprise was greater than he cared to show, his pleasure was very much greater than he allowed himself to admit even to his own breast. Instead of resenting their urbanity as

insolent patronage, he was greatly conciliated by the "bigwigs," who now for the first time crossed his threshold under circumstances that, it might be imagined, would have inclined him to repel their advances. Had he regarded himself as indebted to the odious Kingsfords for the attentions which certainly but for them would never have been offered to him, he would most certainly have expressed vehement disdain for the entire pack of aristocratic intruders who, in accordance with the insufferable insolence of their overbearing class, presumed to darken his doors under the ridiculous conceit that their patronizing blandishments could gratify his republican spirit. But fortunately for himself, for Bessie, and for all persons concerned, his constitutional vanity—a moral endowment that was in no slight degree accountable for the antagonism which he had manifested throughout life to the privileged orders of society—caused him to construe their attentions as consequent upon the respect entertained for himself personally by the class who had found him their resolute foe in the political arena.

Hence it came to pass that he responded with hearty good humour to condescensions which were more calculated to irritate than please a sensitively proud man. It tickled him to think

that, after all, the gentry of the Border had taken the first opportunity to tender him their congratulations on an event which brought him something nearer to their set. It pleased him to know that after all the hard things he had said and done to thwart and defeat them, they were the first to say, "Let bygones be bygones." It gratified him also to be assured that they would not conspire to make his niece feel that by quitting the ranks of the borough tradesmen, and coming within their lines, she had been guilty of culpable presumption. "Anyhow, her perky husband and his stuck-up uncle," the old man perversely reasoned, "wont be able to boast that they raised her into a different class. No, they can't say that, for the 'bigwigs' have made her acquaintance under *my* roof, not *theirs*. Her guests at Coote Hall will have been her guests, ere ever she married, at Green Villa."

So the veteran's ears found music in the sound of the carriage wheels which brought the Border quality over the coach road of his garden; and this being his humour, he exerted himself to show his distinguished visitors that radical and dissenter and tradesman though he was, Cornelius Kilderbee was as much a gentleman in culture, tone, and address as any county magis-

trate within twelve miles of the Borough Cross; and so far was he successful in this endeavour, that more than one coach-load of Bessie's callers returned homewards from Green Villa full of astonishment that old Mr. Kilderbee, of whose dangerous principles they had always heard very terrible accounts, although they had never on any previous occasion exchanged words with him, should be so agreeable and complaisant a gentleman. Perhaps there was a touch of burlesque in the stateliness and courtier-like bearing which the retired merchant assumed towards the gentility who, not more to his astonishment than their own, found themselves within his gates. But the manner accorded so well with the costume and aspect of this representative of the pig-tail period, that notwithstanding the drawbacks of his inflammatory complexion and purple nose, the unanimous verdict of his distinguished inspectors adjudged him to be a highly picturesque and interesting specimen of an obsolete school.

Like most engaged girls Bessie was not more delighted than astonished at the fuss which people made about her affairs as soon as her engagement was announced. Her good fortune had so visible an effect on every one's manner

towards her, that even to herself she scarcely seemed the same Bessie who had hitherto been a comparatively insignificant young person. From the grand folk who decided "to take her by the hand," to the humble people of the town—milliners and petty dealers, and dames with children fast growing up for "gentlefolk's service," who entertained hopes that Mrs. Herrick Kingsford would *take them* by the hand—every one had some sort of homage or flattery for her. Each post brought her letters of congratulation, or sympathy, or curious inquiry from old schoolfellows. Presents of a costliness, that made Bessie think the whole world bent on ruining itself for her benefit, poured in upon her in such unanticipated profusion that the interior of Green Villa had the appearance of a bazaar rather than of a private house. Daily the excitement grew fiercer, the surprises more numerous. What with replying to her numerous correspondents; calling on friends old and new; inspecting new furniture for the Bank House, which the young married people would occupy until death should make a vacancy at Coote Hall; sending out invitations to bridesmaids, and other wedding-guests; holding debates with milliners and needlewomen about her

trousseau, the girl had scarcely a moment's rest by day, and by no means her ordinary amount of sleep by night, during the interval between quarter-day and that first of December, to which she looked forward with fearful delight.

To those doctors who are wont to take up their parable against the deleterious effects of incessant excitement, such a life as Bessie led during this brief span must appear highly prejudicial to health. But the faculty may take the word of a veracious writer, that instead of growing pale, or languid, or lustreless,—instead of exhibiting any signs of mental distress or physical prostration, Bessie grew brighter in countenance, and stronger in body throughout those weeks of tumultuous emotions. Beautifying her with that peculiar beauty which distinguishes newly-engaged girls, and acting not less as a tonic than a stimulant to her nervous system, the joy of her heart gave a warmer tint to her cheek, a richer tone to her voice, greater elasticity to her step, clearer music to her laughter.

Whether it was a period favourable to the finer instincts and higher forces of her moral nature there is room for doubt. The least flattering truth that can be spoken with respect

to love is—that ordinary lovers are so engrossed and absorbed by their own happiness that they never trouble themselves much about the misery of their neighbours. The human heart, like the head, finds one great thought enough for it at a time; and when it entertains so grand a sentiment as love, it makes room for the arrogant guest by ejecting all the minor sympathies from their customary quarters. Perhaps Bessie's case illustrated this unpalatable truth. Certain it is that amidst the excitements that now flowed in upon her she gave little heed to James Stapleton. Scarcely a week had elapsed since her dismissal of his suit when his attachment and all its consequences seemed to her as though they were an affair of a far distant past. So many events had transpired in it that the week appeared one of years rather than one of days. When she could see him without changing colour, could hear his voice and yet feel no stirring at the heart, could look into his eyes without flinching, could place her hand in his as coolly as though he had never dropped a tear upon it, it would have been very strange if she had regarded their interview under the blazing mass of Virginian creeper as an incident of recent occurrence. Indeed, although the fact may be construed to her disadvantage by a

certain class of highly romantic readers, it must be acknowledged that the event, even when it recurred to her mind, soon ceased to be a matter of much moment, and that, instead of interpreting his calmness towards her as an indication of heroic fortitude and fine consideration for her feelings, she accepted it as a proof that he was not so deeply wounded by the rebuff as she had feared he would be.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Wherein Herrick makes Choice of a "Best Man."

TO the same cause also it must be partly attributed that the circumstances, which had killed James's affection for his old schoolfellow, produced so little effect on the sensibilities of the latter that in a marvellously short time he could reflect on them without poignant discomfort, and could maintain his customary tone of familiar confidence to the man whose friendship he had abused. To represent that Herrick experienced no sense of humiliation when he reflected on those occurrences would be to do him injustice; for to his credit, or rather in illustration of the better side of his imperfectly bad nature, it must be recorded that many months passed ere he ceased to blush in secret for his perfidious conduct. But like many other men of selfish instincts and shallow feeling, he was a clever hypocrite to his own conscience, and could find comfort in assuring himself that he was not a bad fellow even when his own heart

gave the lie to his self-flattery. So in spite of his secret uneasiness he made a not altogether unsuccessful effort to persuade himself that he had no reason to be uneasy in James's presence, or in any way alter his demeanour to him. The extent to which this attempt at self-delusion was successful will be best described by saying that it was continually repeated, but never repeated without a certain measure of transient satisfaction.

To have admitted to the world that a coolness had arisen between him and his friend would have produced embarrassment and scandal; to have confessed its existence to himself would have been one step towards revealing the unpleasant fact to the gossips of the borough. So mustering all the resolution of his arrogant but rather infirm nature, Herrick said to himself, "The position no doubt was awkward; but the position is at an end, and the awkwardness is at an end also. Our friendship was ruffled but not broken; and as James Stapleton was the sufferer and to a certain extent an aggrieved party in the affair that threatened to divide us, it would not be generous in me to do anything which might remind him of painful occurrences. Had that affair never caused a slight misunderstanding between us, I should without a moment's debate have asked

him to be 'best man' at my wedding. Not to ask him under existing circumstances would be to put a slight upon him—in fact, to intimate that our friendship had lost its old footing. Now Jem is a dear old fellow, and nothing shall induce me to put a slight upon him. So I will ask him to be my 'best man,' as though nothing unpleasant had occurred."

Acting on this magnanimous resolution, just about a fortnight before the appointed first day of December, Herrick entered James's consulting-room, and finding the surgeon at home and disengaged, abruptly entered on the business of his call.

"Almost everything is settled, Jem," he began, with an effort resuming the familiar style of address which James's altered tone had compelled him to discontinue for some weeks; "the wedding-cake is ordered; the bridesmaids have agreed about their bonnets; I have been measured for the regulation blue swallow-tails and yellow vest. The ring is in my pocket, and I shall feel myself fully equipped for every possible emergency if you'll promise to come within the ropes and be my bottle-holder."

The flippancy of the words did not conceal the speaker's embarrassment; and his confusion was

still more apparent when a painful silence followed their utterance.

“You wont refuse me, Jem?” pleaded Herrick, changing his tone, and dropping his gaze as soon as it had encountered James’s brightening eyes and rapidly rising colour. “Out of regard to old times—you wont decline?”

“The less we say about old times, Kingsford, the better will be our chances of keeping up a neighbourly intercourse.”

“You’ll do me a kindness,” quickly returned Herrick, taking no notice of James’s rebuff, “if you consent; and you’ll pain others besides myself if you decline.”

By which diplomatic stroke Mr. Herrick Kingsford carried his point.

“What!” James inquired, becoming very pale as suddenly as he had flushed a minute earlier, “do you mean that she wishes it?”

“She’ll be sorry to hear that you have refused my request.”

“Did she tell you to say so?”

“No; but she knows that I had decided to ask you: and if you say ‘No,’ Bessie will be vexed and troubled about it. There’s only one construction that she can put on your refusal.”

For a full minute James thought the matter

over ; and then putting Bessie's pleasure before every other consideration, he answered slowly, "On that understanding I consent to be your best man. But mind, Kingsford, it goes against the grain of me *here*," laying his hand on his breast, "to say 'Yes.' Still, since Miss Clayton wishes it, that's enough. Do you want anything more of me, Kingsford?"

This question was put after a pause.

"Yes, Jem," Herrick exclaimed, warmly, "I wish to God that you wouldn't call me Kingsford, and keep me at arm's length. My pride wouldn't let me speak in this way to any man but you. You are punishing me more cruelly than you think."

"Kingsford," James answered, with a significance that was not lost on his old chum, "I call you Kingsford because I shall always think of you as Kingsford ; but I'll call you Herrick if *she* wishes me to do so."

Relinquishing the hopeless contest, Herrick turned to depart, saying as he did so, "Well, well, anyhow I am obliged to you for promising to be my best man."

"I'll be your *best man*," rolled out the lowest tone of James Stapleton's thunderous voice ; "and in a certain sense I'll be your best friend

through life. But, Kingsford, I can never again be your 'old friend' in the sense in which I have been."

So having in no way lessened the distance between himself and that honest heart from which he had been ejected once and for ever, Herrick returned to the Bank House on the other side of the High Street, muttering to himself, "No; he'll never forgive me. What an infernal nuisance it is that he is so thin-skinned!"

Whilst Herrick took this view of a disagreeable subject, his thin-skinned friend was saying to himself, "He was right in fact, as well as in his mode of dealing with me. She would be pained if I declined to stand by his side at church, so I could not do otherwise than accept. Moreover, I was fortunate to have so good an opportunity of showing him the consideration by which my conduct to him will always be regulated. Heigho! I shall be glad when December one has come and gone. I think I shall sleep again when it's all over, and I can no longer look for 'a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.'" After a pause he added, "And I do so want sleep. I crave for it, I hunger for it. This sleeplessness is stealing away my strength, and stupefies whilst it weakens me. If this cruel sleeplessness would cease to

afflict me, if I could only get a refreshing slumber once in the twenty-four hours, I could act the part of cheerful spectator with much greater ease and effect."

As he thus communed with himself he stood before the looking-glass of his consulting-room, and surveyed a face on which mental anguish and continual unrest were putting their distinctive marks; and as he saw the pale worn countenance unbrightened by the misleading light of simulated contentment, and studied the features which, in the absence of witnesses, were allowed to express the sorrow that before observant eyes they were required to mask, he was impressed with wonder at the change which two months of secret suffering had wrought in the lines and texture and hue of his uncouth but pleasant visage.

Until his present trouble came upon him sleeplessness was a malady of which he had no personal experience. He had observed it as a pathological phenomenon in men tortured by sharp physical pain, and in women of highly nervous temperaments. He had watched a patient afflicted by *tic-douloureux* who, for weeks, months, years, had never obtained so much as a brief doze without the aid of a narcotic;

but the torments of this miserable wretch had roused less surprise than sympathy in the surgeon, who traced the disorder along one link of the long chain of causation, and having in accordance with orthodox medical system made a diagnosis, which began and ended in a name, left the puzzle where he found it—answered, but unsolved. In cases where pain accompanied sleeplessness the surgeon, whose science was of a decidedly materialistic school, saw nothing that was marvellous. There was sleeplessness and there was pain—the former was due to the latter—that was the state of the case. If he stopped to argue about the nature of pain over every case that came under his eye, he should never get through a day's work; immediate causes were enough for him. But cases of sleeplessness unattended by physical anguish occasioned him perplexity that could not be removed by the repetition of a scientific term; and he would frankly admit that pure insomnia, sleeplessness not distinctly referable to bodily discomfort, was a matter about which he knew just nothing. Of course cases of that disease came under his notice. He could remember the experience of a delicate gentlewoman who, in the absence of all causes to which her illness might be referred,

could not get ten consecutive minutes of sound slumber in as many months, although she had recourse to every opiate that physicians dared to prescribe for her. Fortunate in her circumstances; happy in the prosperity of her husband and children; supplied with every source of pleasure for which she had an inclination; tranquil in conscience; in no way troubled by vague apprehensions of calamity, this lady suddenly lost her power of sleeping. Remedy after remedy was employed without any beneficial result; when just as the patient seemed to be sinking from pure exhaustion consequent on this mysterious failure of natural refreshment, sleep returned just as mysteriously as it had departed, and ere another week had passed she was as strong and vivacious and blithe-hearted as she had ever been in all her life. "Now," James used to say, "this is one of those cases that defy science, and if I live to be a hundred years old I shall know nothing about them."

But here the young surgeon was wrong, for ere he completed his thirty-third year he made close acquaintance with the malady. Never had he so much felt the need and desire for sleep as in that terrible period when sleep was estranged from his pillow. His muscles were numbed by

fatigue ; his bones ached with weariness ; night after night, in spite of the experience of many preceding nights, he sank upon his bed in the hope of finding sleep, and the belief that his extreme nervous prostration must in another hour work its own remedy ; and night after night the event disappointed the hope, and answered the belief with mockery.

He drugged himself with opiates, but instead of producing wholesome slumber, they harried him with hideous nightmares, which were followed by fever and headache and intellectual dulness. To soothe his eyes, in which the monotonous darkness caused an uneasiness similar to that which the optic nerve endures under long exposure to the untempered rays of a glaring sun, he would rise from his restless bed and striking a light illuminate his chamber with candles. Sometimes he was relieved by the music of his night-bell summoning him to a patient. More than once he tried to fight his malady by intellectual exertion ; but when he sat down at his study-table in the dead of night, he found himself as much too weary to read as he was too wakeful to win repose. In vain he stole from his house and wandered up and down his garden in the hope that the cold winterly air

would dispose his rebellious nerves to quiet and torpor.

This singular sickness in no degree disturbed his courage; indeed, it interested rather than terrified him; but though it could neither break nor shake his manhood, it filled him with melancholy, and led him to ponder with appropriate humility on the impotence of human strength and his own need of heavenly support. During which meditations he would stretch out his arms as though they welcomed a very dear friend, or would murmur, "Well, I know now what wretchedness is, and I thank God for it; for the knowledge will make me better able to comfort the wretches who fall in my way, and I am less likely to desire the joys which cannot outlive a storm of such misery as this."

The discipline which James Stapleton underwent in this season of peculiar tribulation was known only to himself and that beneficent Father from whom all our afflictions come; and yet in the changing lines of his countenance, and in various trifling deviations from his established ways of thought and speech—in the quickness with which his conciliatory smiles were followed by manifestations of dejection, and in the greater tenderness which he displayed to the poorest and

most pitiable of his patients—there were signs of the change which his own personal trials were working in him. But of these signs no one near him was heedful. For though this surgeon of a provincial town lived amongst men and women who cherished warm affection for him, he was a stranger to them so far as his deeper thoughts and finer sentiments were concerned, even as each unit of the vast, innumerable human family is but little known to those who know him best. We pry and speculate and incessantly gossip about the superficial phenomena of each other's lives, but our curiosity seldom penetrates beneath the surface of the life that is nearest and most important to us.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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